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TO: Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice  
FROM: Ken Taylor, Executive Director Wisconsin Council on Children and Families  
RE: AB 192

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) is a multi-issue child and family research and advocacy organization that has, now for 132 years, been advocating for policies and practices that help achieve our mission of ensuring that all children in Wisconsin have the opportunity to grow up in safe and supportive families and communities.

WCCF therefore **urges the Committee and legislature to adopt AB 192** as a step in the right direction to protect a growing number of children who are involved in sexual trafficking activities. Although the sexual trafficking of children is not an issue the Council works on directly, we are well aware of significantly increased trafficking activities being reported in areas around the state and understand that Milwaukee is a hub for this activity. There is no debate about the harmful long-term effects on teens that are caught up in sexual trafficking activities, and there should be no debate about the need for us to be more proactive in responding to these situations when we become aware of them.

This bill directly addresses one of the more troublesome aspects of how our systems struggle to provide needed intervention and services for older child victims. Too often, teen girls who are trapped in prostitution by non-caregiver adults fall “between the cracks” of our system. It makes little sense to “blame the victim” by filing delinquent prostitution charges against them, but at the same time they are often not viewed by our systems as the victims of abuse that they really are. As a point of reference, in 2011 there were 13 arrests for juvenile prostitution statewide. We know there are many more victims than that.

AB192 simply assures that when law enforcement believes a non-caregiver adult is encouraging or facilitating that prostitution the situation must be referred to our child protective service system for appropriate assessment. There is no guarantee that assessing the situation will lead to easy solutions, but we do know that not doing adequate assessment limits the chances we have of changing the situation for the better.

I said earlier in my testimony that AB192 is a step in the right direction, but it also raises a number of questions.

The most important of these is what happens once the case is investigated. I know that “permitting or encouraging a child to engage in prostitution” is considered sexual abuse. I also know that while the vast majority of maltreaters are caregivers, in 2011 7% of maltreaters were not caregivers. This leads me to believe that the victims identified through investigations mandated by this bill can receive services, but I have not had time to check with experts at DCF about this. It may be that they need additional authority to adequately serve these youth.

The second, related question is if there are additional investigations conducted and services provided, what is the fiscal impact on counties and BMCW? It is important that we know that.

Finally, assuming that investigations happen and services can be provided, there are significant engagement and practice challenges for the child welfare system in serving these young adults, many of whom do not consider themselves to be the victims that they are, and who have little to no interest in receiving the system’s “help.” This is not a legislative issue, but is important to note. I know that there are a number of people, particularly in Milwaukee, who working hard to figure that out.

I appreciate the authors raising this important issue, and we have a lot of work to do at many levels in Milwaukee and across the state to develop a sufficient response to this tragic and growing problem in our communities.