

## PRESS RELEASE

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### “Stop Criminalizing Kids for Crimes Committed Against Them!”

#### Despite New Sex Trafficking Laws, Maryland Children Can be Charged with Prostitution, Exploiters Walk Away

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**, Every state now has a law against sex trafficking and most state laws include penalties for buying sex with a minor, according to an [annual State Report Card](#) released by [Shared Hope International](#) (SHI), the only U.S. NGO working in every state to end child sex trafficking through legal reform.

“Kids can still be charged and prosecuted as criminals in 31 states because law has not kept up with reality – the reality that these children are victims of sex trafficking and cannot be criminals at the same time for the same thing,” said SHI founder Linda Smith, at a press conference in Orlando, FL where the National Foundation for Women Legislators is meeting.

“We must stop criminalizing kids for crimes committed against them!” declared Smith.

SHI started the annual report card—known as the Protected Innocence Challenge—six years ago, in 2011. That year, 26 states got Fs and 15 had Ds. This year, **Maryland**, along with states across the nation, **enacted important advancements:**

- From 2011 to 2016 Maryland Protected Innocence Challenge grade has gone up from an F to a C.
- This year Maryland extended the Governor’s Safe Harbor Working Group, ensuring a government presence advocating for advancements in the development of a protective response for child sex trafficking victims in Maryland.

Despite this progress, SHI found key inadequacies in state law. Victims are often criminalized, barred from access to services, while sex buyers don’t face penalties that reflect the seriousness of the offense.

SHI research **found critical gaps** in these areas in the laws of **Maryland:**

- Maryland is one of 31 states where children can still be charged and prosecuted for prostitution, ignoring their status as victims of sex trafficking.
- Maryland’s laws have not created avenues to specialized services for victims.
- In Maryland, buyers are not criminalized under the trafficking law, ignoring their role in the crime of sex trafficking, and leaving prosecutors with an incomplete patchwork of laws to combat demand. When buyers are not acknowledged as sex trafficking offenders, only traffickers face penalties under the sex trafficking law. This narrows the definition of child sex trafficking and leave some children unidentified as victims of trafficking.
- In Maryland, a child must have an identified trafficker to be considered a victim of sex trafficking, resulting in some commercially sexually exploited children potentially not being identified as victims of trafficking.

[Shared Hope International](#) is an anti-trafficking organization focusing on prevention, restoration and justice for victims of sex trafficking. Founded in 1998 by Congresswoman Linda Smith, Shared Hope is a trusted leader for training, research, restorative development, and legislative development.

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#### **MEDIA MATERIALS:**

For media convenience, a variety of resources are available at [www.sharedhope.org/press](http://www.sharedhope.org/press). Video clips, including sex trafficking survivor comments, are available at this location: <https://vimeo.com/user12564384/videos>. Videos are password protected, please enter password sharedmedia1 to access media clips.