

SB 586/HB 369 Oral Testimony of Lauren Dooley,
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding this important bill. I have been a foster parent since 2016, have had a dozen children in my home during that time and currently have our adopted daughter, who is almost 4, 2 older girls now aged 21 and 16, and we are preparing to welcome a little boy who is almost 1 in the near future. It is my love and concern for these children that birthed this legislation that is before you now.

As we all know, the system is broken. What you may not realize is how broken and how detrimental it is to these children. Right now, the people who make all the decisions for these precious kids are the social workers, who maybe see them once a month, their attorneys, who spend maybe a half hour with them once every 6 months, the biological parents' attorneys, who solely represent the parents' interests, and the biological parents. The people who know the children best, who care for them and witness their trauma playing out every day are effectively silenced.

This has played out in my own experience. My first placements, a brother and sister, have been bounced

back and forth between their mom and foster care 4 different times going on 4 years now with no permanent home solution in sight. My experience got me started trying to change the law; however, the stories shared by other foster parents have fueled my passion for child welfare even more.

When you read the written testimony, you will understand why this bill is essential, not for us as foster parents, but for the children. DSS does the best they can, but social workers are overwhelmed and overworked. This can have devastating results as in the case of a friend's now adopted son. This boy was sent for an unsupervised weekend visit with his abusive father. He came back beaten up requiring a hospital visit. Sadly, the county decided to send him for another unsupervised weekend visit. This time he came back permanently brain damaged and has random uncontrollable seizures. His future is forever altered because my friend had no way to stand up for him. She and her husband now spend their days trying every possible treatment for him from diets to surgeries.

Let me be clear, this is not about foster parents wanting to storm the courtroom and adopt every child that comes into their home. This is about situations like another friend faced. As she got to know not only

the children, but the biological mother, she realized that the children should not have been removed in the first place. She worked with the family, despite being told the mother wanted to hurt her, which turned out not to be true. This mother just needed a few services and some equipment in her home. The worker failed to deliver on any of it, yet sent the children home anyway, setting this family up for failure. Sadly, the rush to reunify is commonplace. Had my friend had the right to be a party to that case, she could have helped insure a timely, appropriate reunification.

Maryland's children and communities deserve better. Allowing foster and pre-adoptive parents to be parties to their child's case, if they choose to, will allow our judges to make decisions with far more information than they receive now. Allowing us to have access to documents will enable us to speak from a more informed position, rather than just offering a few comments about how the child is doing and then being asked to leave the courtroom.

DHS is touting a push to recruit and retain foster parents. If they truly want to do this, to support those of us who would do anything to help these children, then this bill is the first step. It will not fix every problem, of course, but it's a good start. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.