

February 3, 2020

The Honorable Kathleen Dumais
231 House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: In Support of HB369

Dear Delegate Dumais,

My name is Joseph Gresock and I am a foster parent who resides in Maryland Legislative District 21.

I strongly support HB369 for the following reasons:

- Foster parents (and pre-adoptive or kinship parents) have the most in-depth knowledge of the children in their care, yet they have the least right to be heard in court. This bill will give foster parents the opportunity to help verify, enhance, and if necessary, correct the record.
- Surveys show that a common reason for foster parents to quit is not feeling like their voice is heard in court. With studies showing that 30-50% of foster parents quit within the first year, retention of foster parents (especially the engaged ones who do have something to say in court) is critical. This bill can help give foster parents a voice, and could improve retention levels.
- The bill is likely to reduce the number of unnecessary placement transfers, which studies show cause trauma in children. If the local departments are required to provide reasonable notice in writing of any termination of placement, as proposed in HB369, foster parents will have a better chance to appeal these decisions, many of which are sadly unnecessary, before causing trauma to the child.

As a foster parent of 7 years, having served four children, I would like to share a couple experiences that lead me to support HB369. In our first case, my wife and I cared for a 2-month old boy for 1 year. One day at 4:55pm, I received a call from his case worker telling me to pack his things, because DSS would be picking him up the next morning to be transferred to another foster home. We engaged the state resource parent ombudsman, but were not able to accomplish anything before he was picked up, and that was the last time he ever saw us. From his perspective, he lost the only family he had known within 24 hours, and research shows that each placement transfer increases the Adverse Childhood Event (ACE) score of a child [1]. Later, we learned through the ombudsman's investigation that all of the reasons the local department gave for transferring the child were fabricated, to the best of our knowledge, and none of the reasons indicated that the child was in danger. With HB369, the department would have had to have given us reasonable written notice, which could have allowed us to appeal the transfer decision and avoid what we believe to have been unnecessary trauma in the child.

Our most recent case involved caring for another 2-month old boy for two and a half years before he was placed with his grandmother. During this time, his social worker saw him in our house a total of 12 times, and had dozens of other cases. The child's attorney saw him at most once every 6 months, and had 99 other cases. I was invited to speak freely to the magistrate exactly once, and to serve as a witness exactly once. For all other hearings, I was either not invited into the hearing, or told I could not enter. There were several times during the case when I felt I could have corrected the record being presented to the magistrate. For example, I learned that the local department reported that the "weekly" visits with the biological family were occurring as scheduled, whereas I knew there were sometimes many weeks between visits, and at one point only two visits occurred within a 5-month period. My wife and I had the most knowledge about the child, the actual visit schedule, and how visits affected him, but the least actual opportunity to present this information in court.

Please accept this as my written testimony for the judicial committee hearing.

Sincerely,

Joseph Gresock
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[1] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3783064/>