Dear Judiciary Committee Members,

I am writing in **support of Bill # SB 586/HB 369, Foster Parents, Preadoptive Parents, and Caregivers - Right to Intervene**, that would give foster parents a seat at the table in court hearings about the kids in our care.

I have been a foster parent in Frederick County for nearly six years, and I served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for four years in Maryland and Virginia prior to that. During my years as a foster parent, I've had more than 15 children in my home. I do the daily work of providing for their physical, emotional, educational, medical, and mental needs. For however long they are in my home, they are a part of my life and my family. The right to intervene would give me access to the court documents and the right to remain in the full hearing regarding their case, both of which are vital to my ability to care for my foster children, and can help to ensure that the judge or magistrate has full and accurate information regarding the child and their needs.

Just recently, I attended a court hearing for one of the children in my care. As soon as the hearing got underway, the mother's lawyer requested that the court room be closed and that I and the child's therapist be asked to leave the room. Later, the attorney for the Department of Social Services did come out to ask me if I wanted to speak, but since I had no knowledge of what had been said in the room, I declined. I later learned that some misinformation had been shared, information I would have been able to correct. The magistrate ordered a placement review hearing the following month, at which point I did testify. The entire second hearing could have been avoided had I been able to remain in the court room from the beginning.

Additionally, my foster daughter did attend the court hearing. That night and in the days to come, I struggled to know how to answer her many questions and to help her process what was said in the court room. If I had been able to remain in the room, I would have been in a much better position to support her.

In addition to being present for the entire court hearing, foster parents should have access to court documents. This is the information the judge hears and reads and uses to make determinations about the case, and it needs to be accurate. More than once as a CASA I would find inaccuracies in court documents, usually because the child's social worker had changed, or the social worker had failed to keep detailed records about the events in a case. In one case in particular, the social worker's report noted that the children's' parents had attended far more visits than they had in reality. This, along with some additional missing information, indicated the family was making more significant progress towards reunification than they actually were. As a CASA, I had access to the report and could correct these inaccuracies, that could otherwise have led to additional delays in securing a permanent home for the children. But not every case has a CASA, and no one is better equipped to speak to the day-to-day life of

a foster child than the foster parent who is caring for them. Foster parents need to have access to these documents to ensure the judge has full and correct information to make their decisions.

Maryland is currently fourth from the bottom of the list of states in the percentage of children who find a permanent home each year. Some children languish in foster care for years, far beyond what is necessary for their safety and wellbeing. Our children deserve better, and giving foster parents the right to intervene can help ensure that they get it.

For all of these reasons, I strongly urge this committee to vote **favorably on Bill # SB 586/HB 369, Foster Parents, Preadoptive Parents, and Caregivers - Right to Intervene.**

Respectfully Submitted,

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