

**Testimony**  
**of**  
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**In support of Maryland SB 13**  
*Baltimore, MD*

Family court judicial decisions are a profound social determinant of health for children. A judge decides where a child will live, with whom, who can consent for medical and mental health care, and who pays for health insurance. A judge can even decide who, where when or if a child can have contact with people in the child's support system, including a protective parent and their extended family.

Judges rely heavily on what a custody evaluator say about these issues.

A qualitative study by Haselschwerdt et al. (2011) found that among custody evaluators who have not had training in domestic violence, these custody evaluators believed that 40-80% of their case load involves false allegations.

Training is simply information. It helps professionals think critically about issues. We require specialized training for many professions.

Custody evaluators, who are tasked with making decisions that will impact a child for the rest of their life, need to have the best possible evidence-based information on how domestic violence, coercive control, and child maltreatment impact a child's neurodevelopment.

When the custody evaluator in my own case was asked under oath about her qualifications:

***Q. Did you take any course only focused on any type of sexual or domestic violence?***

***CE: No.***

***Q. Did you ever evaluate a child to see if he or she was a victim of any type of abuse?***

***CE: No.***

***Q. ... Have you ever been qualified as an expert in any type of child abuse?***

***CE: No.***

***Q. Have you ever been qualified as an expert in domestic violence?***

***CE: No.***

Yet, the judge in his oral ruling said: "*I know that there was testimony suggesting that [the custody evaluator] did not have the requisite knowledge, training and skills to perform this evaluation. **I disagree**... I do find [the custody evaluator's] testimony credible and afford it great weight.*"

Custody evaluators need training on these issues because when abuse, coercive control, and intimate terrorism are minimized or not believed or conflated with "conflict", the wrong recommendations for children may be made to the court.

Without nuanced understanding of domestic violence dynamics, custody evaluators may place children and/or their protective parents in unsafe – and potentially lethal – situations.

This is the third year this bill has been presented to this committee. I urge you to please pass this bill for the sake of the best interests of children in the state of Maryland, who deserve to have Custody Evaluators with the requisite knowledge and training on the often subtle signs of domestic violence, coercive control, and child abuse.

Had custody evaluators had this training, it would have made a meaningful difference in the lives of many children, including my own.

## References

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