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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

**SB 13 Family Law- Custody Evaluators-Qualifications and Training Statement
of Support by Bill Sponsor Senator Mary Beth Carozza**

Thank you Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the distinguished Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee for this opportunity to present Senate Bill 13 as amended, Custody Evaluators – Qualifications and Training, and to respectfully ask for your support for this bill which would help ensure the safety and well-being of children and protective parents involved in State custody proceedings involving child abuse or domestic violence allegations.

Serving on the Workgroup to Study Child Custody Court Proceedings Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence Allegations has been one of my most important public service assignments, given the magnitude of the trauma that many children and protective parents experience going through court custody proceedings involving child abuse or domestic violence allegations. I have continued working on domestic violence issues and advocating for children with my appointment to the Governor's Family Violence Council in 2021.

My bill, co-sponsored by Senator Chris West and former Senator and Workgroup Member Susan Lee, focuses on the Workgroup's recommendations dealing with custody evaluators. After hearing from parents, advocates, and legal child custody experts over the past four years, it has become clear that there is clear need for consistent qualifications or training for custody evaluators. This is especially concerning when the courts follow the recommendations in the custody evaluations in over 90 percent of custody cases.

Since my involvement with the Workgroup and after my first introduction of this bill in 2021, I have heard from many parents and child advocacy groups who have shared numerous stories and cases where qualifications and training of the child custody evaluators would have made all the difference in the child's life. This bill is all about putting the child first.

This bill simply requires that certain qualifications and training requirements be met before an individual may serve as a court custody evaluator in these most sensitive cases involving child abuse and domestic violence allegations.

I know this Committee recognizes that custody evaluators have an important role in assisting family law courts in determining custody outcomes in some of the most sensitive and difficult cases involving allegations of domestic violence and child abuse. We have an obligation to ensure a custody evaluator

meets certain qualifications and has completed 20 hours of training and five hours of continued training every two years.

This is the third year in presenting this legislation to this Committee, and it is time to pass this commonsense bill which simply ensures that our child custody evaluators, dealing with some of the most traumatic cases impacting our children, will meet basic qualifications and training requirements.

Last session, this Committee and the Maryland General Assembly approved Senate Bill 17 sponsored by Senator Chris West requiring training for judges and magistrates presiding over child custody cases involving child abuse or domestic violence. It only makes sense that child custody evaluators be trained along the same lines as the judges, especially given the heavy reliance of judges on the recommendations of child custody evaluators.

During last year's SB 17 deliberations, several concessions were made to accommodate the concerns of the Maryland Judiciary, and we have taken this same approach this year with SB 13. In an effort to work in good faith with the Judiciary, we have amended SB 13 to be consistent with the training requirements in SB 17, including reducing the number of hours of training from 60 to 20 hours.

The question has been raised whether the child custody evaluators qualifications and training requirements should be in a Rule or in a statute. When we think about the many qualifications and training bills that the Maryland General Assembly approves that impact positions NOT dealing with our most precious resource, our children, I believe we as legislators have an obligation to enact the child custody evaluators qualifications and training bill into law.

To share a little perspective, the Maryland General Assembly two years ago unanimously approved SB 159 sponsored by Vice Chair Waldstreicher to require education and training requirements for animal control officers. This bill required 80 hours of training and 6 hours of continued training every two years for animal control officers, which is far less than the 20 hours of training required of judges and child custody evaluators.

Now is the time to move forward in approving SB 13 this session to ensure that child custody evaluators meet certain qualification and training requirements which would result in better protecting the safety and well-being of those children, many of whom are experiencing trauma, as they go through a custody court proceeding involving child abuse or domestic violence allegations.

Mr. Chair and Vice Chair, I respectfully urge the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee Members for a favorable report on Senate Bill 13. Thank you for your kind attention and consideration.