

January 30, 2023

Senator Carozza

11 Bladen St, Room 314

James Office Building

Annapolis, MD 21401

SB0013 – Family Law - Custody Evaluators – Qualifications and Training

I am in high favor of the above referenced bill; due to the ongoing abuse I continue to battle not only for myself, but for my innocent girl's ages 8 and 3. Since my last testimony was shared on 2/4/22 for SB0017, the abuse has intensified. The false assault charge from my former mother in law was placed in the stet docket. My attorney assured me it would be formally dismissed between March and November 2023. I still regret not taking it to trial in hopes to prove their legal abuse. I was traumatized by this experience, as I had no choice but to sit in on a jury trial for a real assault that day. The abuser was sentenced to 10 years in prison for strangling and holding his girlfriend hostage for 5 days. I was seated directly behind his mother, watching as she sobbed uncontrollably. I was most certainly in a place I did not belong and realize this was done intentionally. I will never forget these wasted hours spent in court rooms, time away from my youngest child that I will never get back.

The stalking and harassment have caused me to move to a secluded location away from the public road, just minutes over the Maryland line. I gave a 90 day written notice of intent to move to West Virginia on May 30, 2022, per our custody consent order. This was the only part of the order that he contributed to and would not agree to it unless this clause was added. This decision to move enraged my children's father, as he and his family would no longer be able to drive by to try and intimidate me. He made every part of this process difficult from the paperwork to keep our oldest daughter in the same school, to refusing to keep their health insurance in Maryland so she wouldn't have to switch her therapist, using HRDC Head Start instead of me for childcare (first right of refusal), and now two contempt charges. He sent our oldest to school with Covid after I informed him she had a fever the night before, stating she "feels fine." He literally agrees to nothing, unless it is a benefit to him.

In June 2022, I received a phone call from a number I did not recognize. I let it go to voicemail. Then, I received a text from the same number stating they were not a telemarketer, but a mediator who was contacted by my children's father. We had not discussed getting neither a new mediator nor any changes that we wanted to make, which our court order states we are to thoroughly discuss any changes prior to mediation. I was pleased with the first mediator we used, but as usual; he had an issue with him and requested a "new set of eyes." I didn't argue and went along, which I now regret. The new mediator, who is not certified by the Maryland Program for Mediator Excellence, communicated with both parties for 30 days via three forms of communication. On the day of the scheduled mediation session, she canceled via email 2 hours prior. She had a phone call with him the day prior, giving him my list of modification requests. This is exactly what he wanted so he could continue to paint me out to be a negative and uncooperative co-parent. The mediator did not give me any of his requested changes because she did not hold her word and call me at the scheduled time we agreed on. She gave legal advice, encouraged him to file contempt, and threatened me. I reported this mediator to the Allegany County Circuit Court Family Services Coordinator the following week, not only for her misconduct, but also the biased and unprofessional approach in this high conflict situation. This only escalated the difficult communication between the co-parents.

Two months later, I was served with two charges of contempt and a petition to modify the custody order. The contempt charges are for not doing FaceTime every night and changing a vacation week to be with my family during the unexpected death of my 8 year old nephew who was in a new trial for a leukemia treatment. He had a rare reaction to the treatment. A decent human being with empathy would not do this to the mother of his children. A real human would be kind, by understanding how important family is; especially, a person who is a licensed therapist. My girls are being robbed of a healthy mother because of the constant counter parenting that is occurring. We do not have a co-parenting relationship and it is going on year 4. We rarely speak to each other. All communication is through Talking Parents, a platform for actual co-parents. He uses this to abuse me further, actions not matching words; name calling, belittling and falsely accusing me of anything he can to try and get me to react in an effort to make me appear "unstable." He does not keep me fully informed of their general health and welfare (also in our court order). I take them to every dental and doctor appointment. He has recently admitted to giving them melatonin. Now, my youngest lies down in bed asking for it on a regular basis. She opened up to me in the car riding home on Friday night and said "Daddy said Mommy is saying nasty things about me." This occurred two days after he sent me a harassing message regarding a post he read online assuming it was about him (stalking via social media), twisting the story and falsely accusing me of calling him names. The girls come home regularly and say "I miss my daddy, I want my daddy" after spending the whole weekend with him. Another difficult aspect is his mother, who spends more time with the girls than he does, plans their activities, buying them whatever they want, feeding and bathing them, even

has a wardrobe for them. They often tell me they get separated when they go to their Dad's and that they don't like being separated. I cannot get them on a good sleep routine because he sleeps with the TV on, turned up loud and the girls are still sleeping with us. This in turn, is affecting their overall moods and behaviors. Not once did a custody evaluator speak to me or my girls before or after we signed a custody consent order in September 2020. This should have never been overlooked after all of the evidence of addiction was presented to my divorce attorney. This process must change, it has to. Parents and children are suffering because of the lack of knowledge, training and experience to recognize what unhealthy behaviors are developed as a result of domestic violence and addiction. My children deserve so much better than this. They deserve unconditional, safe love away from manipulation and coercive control. My children deserve to be just that; children. That is the opposite of what is happening to them when they are not in my care. Please consider my ongoing situation as proof that this bill is crucial for our children and protective parents. It is necessary and highly favored. Our children are the future. Thank you for your time and attention to this urgent crisis.

Heather Twigg

Protective parent, DV advocate & survivor

West Virginia, former resident of Maryland

240-362-4554