

Senator William C. Smith, Jr.
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: SB365 – Family Law – Custody Evaluators – Qualifications & Training

Chairman Smith,

My name is Annie Kenny, and I am a protective parent of three daughters from St. Mary's County. Several years ago, I discovered that my now ex-husband was abusing our oldest daughter. He was indicted on felony child sex abuse charges and is now a Tier III Registered Sex Offender for life. It took seven months in criminal court for my children's father to be convicted. It took four years in family court for me to get a no-contact order in place, protecting my children from him.

It's important to understand that the father of my children was already convicted and a registered sex offender BEFORE I ever stepped foot in family court. Our case involved complex issues of child sexual abuse, grooming, signs of childhood trauma, and the long-term effects of trauma on children, just to name a few, but not a single individual in the courtroom during our numerous hearings was trained on any of these topics. It wasn't until our fourth court appearance that the term "abuse" was even used, and to this day, the term "sexual abuse" has never been spoken in the courtroom.

Supervised visitation was granted for my ex-husband, to be conducted on weekends at his mother's house, supervised by her. A year into the visitation, after months of behavioral concerns with one of my daughters, she made disclosures to several members of her mental health team, all of which immediately filed a report with Child Protective Services. Child Protective Services and the police questioned my children, and ultimately came to the conclusion that it was completely a civil issue, as no laws had been broken, and my girls were not disclosing any sexual abuse at the time.

I chose to stop sending my children for their "supervised" visitation, and braced myself against numerous contempt charges and hearings. In my first contempt hearing, the magistrate refused to even discuss my ex's conviction, or his sexual abuse of my oldest daughter. He instead directed me to continue sending my children for their weekend visits at Grandma's house, with a stipulation that their father be told to leave the property at night and he not be allowed to sleep there while the children were present. Again, I couldn't bring myself to send my daughters. My non-compliance escalated my ex-husband's anger. I spent months required to be in daily contact with him, discussing all aspects of our children with him. He followed us, stalked our home, bought electronic devices for my children and harassed them constantly through them. The magistrate at one point even directed me to include my ex-husband in my daughter's mental health therapy. I was granted an unrestricted conceal carry gun permit by the Maryland State Police at the same time that I was meeting my ex-husband for supervised dinners weekly, and celebrating birthdays together at Chuck E Cheese.

Once I determined that the supervised visitation under his mother's watch was not actually supervised, and therefore unsafe, I tried numerous other routes in order to appease the court system. I tried in-house supervised visitation through Center for Children, but they stopped having a supervisor on staff. I supervised multiple visits MYSELF. He eventually hired an organization called Promise Resource Center that allowed for supervised visitations out in the community. We would meet at Burger King every

Friday after work. He violated his contract with Promise Resource Center numerous times, following me to my car after visits, attempting to get the children to walk to his car with him, encouraging one of them to find him on social media and change her device password, using the information he gained at the visits to follow us, and ultimately even touching my children in ways not prohibited by his contract. Promise Resource was under zero obligation to contact CPS, because his behavior didn't qualify as criminal. They were under zero obligation to give me details, because I was not their client, my ex-husband was. And they were under zero obligation to report to the courts, because we did not have a court order specifying this type of supervised visitation. Trying to maintain a relationship between my children and their father at any cost, exposed them to years of additional trauma. Not being within my own legal right to decide to STOP the relative supervised visitation when I discovered my daughters were not being protected cost me six months of court battles and over \$15,000.

I stopped having to communicate with and expose my children to my ex-husband in the spring of 2021, but not because a team of properly trained professionals recognized the trauma my children were being exposed to and opted to protect them. Our freedom came at the cost of other children, as my ex-husband has now been convicted of sexually abusing other, non-familial, children, and is currently serving his prison sentence. I am terrified of what will happen when he is released and starts his mission of accessing my daughters again. And I am angered by the prolonged suffering experienced by my daughters. My middle daughter, Nora, has been subjected to numerous psychiatric hospital stays, a suicide attempt, and even a long-term residential facility stay. Instead of starting her freshman year of high school like her peers, she was spending 2 ½ months facing her trauma and working on coping skills. Having family court professionals who are properly trained on the significant topics related to child trauma would greatly reduce the ongoing trauma that many families are subjected to as they spend years stuck in family court, forced into unsafe relationships and contact with an abuser.

Resistance to properly trained family court professionals is concerning, and certainly not aligned with the best interest of children. Please prioritize child safety at all costs. My daughter, Nora, is also submitting testimony this year, and will be testifying in person in the House Judiciary hearing. We both appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

Annie Kenny

Protective Parent & Certified Victim/Child Safety Advocate