



WRITTEN TESTIMONY
House Bill 833 (HB833) - Divorce and Annulment - Removal of Barriers
to Remarriage
House Judiciary Committee
February 20, 2020

SUPPORT

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CHANA
Advocacy and supportive
services for domestic abuse

The Shofar Coalition
Prevention and healing services
for childhood trauma and
sexual abuse

SAFE: Stop Abuse of Elders
Education and intervention
services for older adults

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Alicia Bickoff. I am testifying in favor of SB 536 and HB 833. I am the Director of Programs at CHANA, a Program of the Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore. CHANA is a domestic violence, sexual abuse, and elder abuse agency that serves the citizens of Baltimore County and City. Approximately 90% of our domestic violence clients are Jewish and about half of them identify as part of the Orthodox community.

Women in abusive marriages come to CHANA because they want to know their options and rights. They meet with a legal advocate to discuss civil and religious divorces. The discussion about a religious divorce is not a matter of protocol – it is based on need. Most of our religious clients have been told repeatedly by their husbands that they will never be given a get, or that they only will receive one in exchange for surrendering their custodial or financial rights. When clients walk through our doors, the threat of being an agunah – a chained woman – is foremost on their minds.

A get is a writ of Jewish divorce which terminates a marriage and enables the parties to remarry under Jewish law. It may only be presented by a husband to his wife. Without a get, neither party can remarry and their children are considered illegitimate.

What underlies all domestic violence is power and control. Our clients experience physical, sexual, psychological, financial, technological and spiritual abuse. Some are hit, kicked, and raped, while others are told daily that they are stupid and worthless. The act or threat of withholding a get is a continuation of that abuse. It brings truth to the threat of, “If I can’t have you, no one will.” because their wives cannot remarry without a get. Even when a victim takes civil action to leave their abusers, the get disables them from truly being free.



We have seen abusers who have withheld gets for over a decade, who flee the country rather than give a get, or who demand thousands of dollars for a get. We have seen abusers who leave the religious community to avoid pressure to comply. These abusers do not care, while their wives still do. Their wives are forced to choose to follow their cultural beliefs or leave their religious community in order to remarry – no one should be in that position.

This is not the plight of an isolated minority. This bill will help numerous women. CHANA has seen an abundance of clients who have been victim of a get being withheld or the get being used as leverage in divorce proceedings. It does not include the countless number of victims who stay in abusive relationships as a result of threats of being denied a get. They see no point in getting a civil divorce or receiving services. This bill will address and avail some of those concerns. We ask you to support this bill so that our clients can receive the full relief that a civil divorce is intended to provide – the ability to remarry or simply move forward with their lives free of their abusers.

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