

Good Afternoon. To the Judiciary Committee and Delegate Nick Charles and other sponsors for HB 1114 & 1328, thank you for responding to our request to speak before you today. My name is Eric Smith, founder and executive director of the Winning Strategies: Fatherhood, The Courts & Custody organization. I am a lifelong Maryland resident and more importantly, I am a Father.

Winning Strategies is a non-profit organization created as a resource to advocate for fathers in Baltimore City who seek joint custody of their children. We provide them with the guidance and support needed to navigate the family court system.

Our organization has conducted a review of the proposed House Bills – 1114 & 1328. We agree these proposed bills support the 2011 report from the Department of Legislative Services entitled “Joint Custody – Presumption”. The possibility of being granted more joint custody agreements speaks volumes to non-custodial fathers. As fathers, we have a greater opportunity with these House Bills to obtain joint custody and articulate how we intend to do everything possible in the best interest of our children.

In the past, fathers, myself included, were not aware that our wishes in regards to custody had to be writing. There are no resources or services to give fathers this guidance. I have seen first-hand the bias in favor of mothers when faced with custody challenges.

Is it the recommendation of Winning Strategies: Fatherhood, The Courts & Custody that the case management process be kept at 30-60 days with new provisions within HB 1114 & 1328. For example, HB 1114 SS 9-109 A.1 however all of HB 1328 is good. As well as including a provision for custody to go to the father in the event of “maternal gatekeeping”.

In conclusion, Winning Strategies not only assists fathers. We work with mothers too who feel stonewalled and are unable to navigate the court system to force fathers to be accountable for their children.

Advocating for fathers’ rights is personal to me. I had to fight the family court system to obtain joint custody agreements for

both of my children and I am not finished. I am still fighting for my youngest child. While I fight for myself, it is imperative that Winning Strategies fights for the Baltimore City parents who must be in the lives of their children and the children who need their parents.

Thank you for your time today.