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TESTIMONY PROVIDING INFORMATION ABOUT SENATE BILL 355

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The House of Ruth is a non-profit organization providing shelter, counseling and legal services to victims of domestic violence throughout the State of Maryland and has offices in Baltimore City and Baltimore, Prince George's, and Montgomery Counties. Senate Bill 355 sets out the educational and training requirements for court custody evaluators.

The House of Ruth believes it is important that court custody evaluators are fully trained in the subject areas outlined in the bill. A child custody evaluation is a process in which a mental health expert, often a psychologist or social worker, evaluates a family and makes recommendations to the court regarding a custody, visitation, and/or a parenting plan that is in a child's best interests. It is critical for custody evaluators to have full knowledge of the Adverse Childhood Experiences study and the impacts on children of trauma and domestic violence, child abuse, and emotional abuse.

The House of Ruth supports the intent of this bill but is concerned about moving the educational and training requirements for court custody evaluators from the Maryland Rules of Court to the statute while leaving the rest of the conditions governing custody evaluators in the Maryland Rules. We believe that the Maryland Rules are the correct place for all of the requirements for custody evaluators, as the Court needs to be able to adjust and amend these conditions as necessary to meet the needs of the courts and families without having to wait for the next legislative session to come around. In addition, the House of Ruth believes it does not make sense to have some of the conditions governing custody evaluators in the Rules and some in the statute.