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SENATOR WILLIAM C. SMITH, JR.

SENATE JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS COMMITTEE
2 EAST
MILLER SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

RE: **SB0017** CHILD CUSTODY – CASES INVOLVING
CHILD ABUSE OR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE-TRAINING
FOR JUDGES

I am a well-educated, emotionally healthy protective parent, intimate partner violence/betrayal trauma survivor, and family court reform advocate. I hold a favorable position as to [SB0017 Child Custody – Cases Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence – Training for Judges](#).

My own divorce and custody case in Baltimore County, Maryland began when my now former spouse filed for divorce as a coercive control measure to force the issue of unsupervised visitation, despite Child Protective Services requiring that he be supervised during his parenting time and not have any overnight parenting time. My former spouse identifies as a sex and pornography addict (*including participation in prostitution and child sexual abuse documentation viewing (i.e., child pornography) and other illegal and/or sexual predatory behaviors*) and is an admitted sexual abuser of our daughter, as evidenced by his admission to a Certified Sex Addiction Therapist, admission to me, and an “indicated” finding by the Baltimore County Department of Social Services. Unjustly, he was not charged, convicted, nor listed on the Sex Offender Registry because he refused to interview with the detective assigned to our case. There was simply no accountability.

Despite my former spouse’s secret sexual life of twenty plus (20+) years and admittance of child sexual abuse against our daughter, his Complaint for Divorce and Child Custody was entertained by the court without much understanding of the dynamics of abuse, sex/porn addiction, child sexual abuse, and victim/partner trauma (PTSD, C-

PTSD). Our divorce/custody case was put through the standard procedure. We as Plaintiff (him) and Defendant (me) were treated as equal parties to the dysfunction and labeled as a “high conflict divorce” when the reality is that my former spouse has a long history of emotional, psychological, sexual, physical, and financial abuse against me and our children. It only takes one dysfunctional party to exert power and control and be dysfunctional to create a difficult divorce case. Because of the lack of substantial education of the forgoing issues by Judges and other court professionals, my divorce and custody case took two years and is still being litigated post-divorce. Court professionals, including Judges, also lack education and training to recognize an abuser’s tactics of litigation abuse, financial abuse, and domestic abuse by proxy via the children during the divorce/custody process.

Despite my documentation, support of highly specialized and trained therapeutic professionals, and the evidence against my former spouse, I was still unfairly tasked with defending myself and my children against our abuser in the family court setting. It was revictimizing and retraumatizing because of the lack of continuing education and simple understanding of abuse and sex/porn addiction dynamics by the Judge and other court professionals. I am approaching the \$200,000.00 mark in legal fees; simply to keep my children safe. Much of my legal fees were in explaining to my Attorney, the Court Custody Evaluator, the Therapeutic Privilege Attorney, and the Judge the dynamics of abuse. I was placed in the precarious position of having to respectfully educate highly educated and certified professionals before I could advocate for the safety of my own children. There are several recent studies which support my experience, your proposed bill, and my endorsement of same. They are as follows:

- The Meier Study
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- The Saunders Study
- The Santa Clara University Study (High Conflict individuals in the family court system)

I ask that [SB0017](#) be passed and that the following suggestions be considered for inclusion:

1. Victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)/Domestic Violence, Child Sexual Abuse, or any documented abuse be provided FREE legal counsel. Much of my frustration and stress was in finding an Attorney to take my case and one whom I could afford. I had to borrow money, max out credit cards, and my parents refinanced their mortgage-free home to assist me in protecting my children. I still owe my Attorney \$30,000.00 in Attorney fees and that amount is growing by the day. If accused perpetrators can receive free legal counsel in criminal court, why can’t victims of abuse receive fee legal counsel in Family

Court. As an aside, MD Legal Aid, House of Ruth Legal Services, Turnaround Legal Services, and Child Justice were contacted several times throughout my case and none could assist me. I financially and substantively qualified for services, but they simply did not have the staff to represent my complicated, drawn-out case. This is not specific to me or my case. This is the experience of many survivors when encountering divorce and custody issues with their abuser.

2. Please know that abuse does not stop once the relationship has ended. If anything, the abuse is increased and becomes more insidious; often via litigation, finances, and domestic abuse by proxy via the children in common.
3. When a Judge is appointed to a divorce/custody case with documented abuse and/or addiction issues, that Judge should remain the Judge for the entirety of the case (unless found to be unfit for the task). My case had several Judges and Magistrates. It was luck of the draw as to who would hear my case for each pleading, hearing, or trial. These cases need consistency of oversight, as it is the patterns of post-separation abusive behavior which become evident to the court when overseen in this manner.
4. Judges need to be proactive when writing orders and provide clear, concise wording for consequences when the court order is not followed. Simply assuming that the abusive party will be reasonable is placing the victims in further harm; often requiring many revisits to court to clarify the orders. The abuser should never be given any form of decision making, as it is handing them the tools of power and control.

I thank you for your time and remain supportive of these measures. I much more to say on these topics and welcome you to contact me to discuss further.

SINCERELY,

Christine J. Drumgoole

CHRISTINE J. DRUMGOOLE

Healthy, protective parent, intimate partner violence/betrayal trauma survivor, and advocate.