



Judiciary Committee, Room 101
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Strong Support for HB 561

February 15, 2022

Dear Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon and Committee Members:

We strongly urge the passage of HB 561 out of Committee. This vital judicial education bill is long overdue and will help protect the lives of countless Maryland children whose parents are separating and divorcing.

The Center for Judicial Excellence is committed to protecting child abuse and domestic violence survivors in our nation's family courts and to fostering accountability throughout the judicial branch. For 16 years, the Center has been a voice for vulnerable children and a catalyst for child safety. Every day, we honor the lives of more than **820 American children** who have been murdered by a divorcing or separating parent since 2008, including Prince McLeod Rams, whose mother testified in the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on this important bill. Many of these tragic cases were preventable homicides if family court judges had only been properly trained in the detection of domestic violence and child abuse.

Our national child homicide research was cited in the Maryland **Workgroup to Study Child Custody Court Proceedings Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence Allegations Final Report**, which brought together many of our colleagues who are experts from the child abuse, domestic violence, and legal communities to study the child safety crisis in Maryland family courts. Their official recommendation on the issue of judicial training (Recommendation 8), after many months of exhaustive testimony and study, recommended 60 hours of initial training and 10 hours of additional training every two years.

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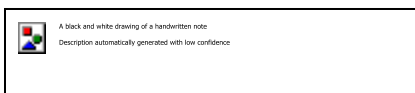
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This legislation represents a significant “watering down” of this initial recommendation, but it represents a good faith compromise due to opposition from the judicial branch. While we prefer the Workgroup’s initial recommendation, we strongly support HB 561 as a lifesaving first step in ensuring that all judges presiding over child custody cases that include child abuse or domestic violence. It is especially vital that this training be created in consultation with domestic violence and child abuse organizations, since Judicial Councils across the U.S. have failed to adequately address these issues on their own.

This organization has worked for the past two years with Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) in the U.S. House of Representatives to craft Kayden’s Law, a federal statute in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) that similarly proposes 20 hours of initial judicial training on child abuse and domestic violence for judges involved in these same child custody cases. This federal legislation actually provides funding to states who pass bills protecting the safety of children in custody cases with initial and ongoing training of judges in domestic violence and child abuse, just as HB 561 does. So this bill represents an important step in bringing these vital financial resources to the state of Maryland, in addition to ensuring that judges stop missing the clear signs of risk in domestic violence and child abuse cases they preside over.

Thank you for your consideration and swift passage of this vital child safety legislation.

Sincerely



Kathleen Russell
Executive Director