

HB 1069 Protective Orders – Coercive Control - Favorable

To: The Honorable Luke H. Clippinger, Esq. Chair Judiciary Committee

From: Jessica M. Nachtman

Date: February 28, 2023

Hello, and thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share my story. I respectfully request that the Committee give favorable consideration to House Bill 1069 – legislation that would authorize a person to petition for a protective order against another person whom the petitioner alleges has engaged in controlling or coercive behavior toward the petitioner.

Victims report that coercive control can feel like death by a thousand small cuts. That is, any incident in and of itself may not seem like a big deal to outsiders, but the pattern of these abuses can criminally deprive another person of their human rights.

My name is Jessica Nachtman. By all societal standards I am a successful, intelligent, independent, and outgoing person. I grew up in Harford County, graduated from Fallston High school with a 3.5 GPA and lettered in 5 different varsity sports. I went on to graduate from NC Wesleyan University with a 3.4 GPA, earned a dual-bachelor's degree in psychology & criminal justice and played two varsity-level collegiate sports. I now live in Lutherville with my husband and our four boys and am a medical device surgical specialist, supporting surgeons during cases in the Operating Room.

I married my ex-husband in 2008 after becoming pregnant and my life unpredictably changed. Something always felt "off" about his behavior, but it was never anything glaring, at least at first. He needed to know where I was at all times, "in case there was an emergency." He controlled the finances and requested that I ask his permission before spending money because he was "helping me become more financially responsible". There was no need to spend money on maternity clothes since I was "only pregnant for a few months and his clothing fit me well", so I wore in his hand-me-downs for the majority of my pregnancies. He didn't understand why I wore makeup, highlighted my hair, painted my nails or wore nice clothing if I wasn't seeking attention from other men, especially since he already loved me for the way I was. After continually having to reassure him and endure the ensuing arguments, I eventually stopped those things altogether.

It took years to see the pattern, but he would pick a fight with me every time I made plans to see a friend or family member, insinuating that I was selfish for leaving our young boys. He requested I call to check in at certain times while out and would be livid if I was even a few minutes late, claiming it was disrespectful to make him worry. It became easier not to fight him, so I avoided leaving the house whenever possible. Eventually I lost all but one of my friends and rarely, if ever saw my family.

In 2014, I found a recording device in my pillowcase, a spy pen in my car and discovered he had been reading my personal emails for years without my knowledge or permission. One time he told me that "even if no one is around, someone is always listening". That was the last straw and I tried to seek a way out through the courts.

Unfortunately, Coercive Control was not illegal or acknowledged by the legal system in 2014. My ex-husband weaponized the judiciary against me by continuously delaying the process for almost three years in the court system. I tried to seek help before and during my divorce but was denied, ignored, and belittled by the many people, organizations and mental health professionals I reached out to for help. Coercive Control was simply not recognized at that time.

During the pendency of our divorce proceeding, he was verbally abusive in front of the kids, the surveilling intensified & I became paranoid. The stress was so terrible that my hair began falling out in chunks and my weight drastically plummeted. He delayed attending mediation, which meant we had no legal parenting plan in place so I couldn't move out and was stuck in our guest room. One night, he broke into my room and despite asking him more than 40 times in 2 hours to please leave me alone, he refused, stating that it was his house and he had a right to go where he wanted. He followed me to the restroom and back & wouldn't leave when I wanted to change my clothes. Terrified, I ran to my car, locked the doors and called 911. When the County police arrived, I told them what happened and they said that while they didn't agree with his behavior, they weren't the language police. Then they handed me a pamphlet for a statewide DV shelter and said to call them if things turned physical.

My therapist at the time, said that many other women who are victims of physical violence had it "so much worse." I left 4 separate messages for the Domestic Violence shelter stating that I was being verbally and emotionally abused and needed help. I never received a call back. I received poor legal advice at the time and therefore did not utilize the illegal surveillance in my divorce case.

Currently, I am back in the court system fighting for legal custody of my two biological children. My ex-husband is exhibiting the same coercively controlling behavior towards them as he did towards me. Right now, today, my children are victims of coercive control at the hands of my ex-husband and there is nothing I can do to help them.

Without any sort of law in place, I've been told that it's up to my boys to "grow a backbone" and speak up for what they want because nothing can be done otherwise. The problem is, I was a strong, intelligent, independent woman when I met my ex-husband, and it took me almost a decade to figure out what was going on. How can anyone expect more from a 12 and 14-year-old boy?

The passing of HB1069 will prevent people like my ex-husband from covering up their abusive behavior, and help break the cycle of coercive control abuse which has victimized so many people, including my own children, in the future. While I continue my fight to help my children, I hope that you pass this law to help educate the lawyers, judiciary, and law enforcement on what abuse through Coercive Control is and help the many victims break free of the vicious cycle.

Yours Truly,

Jessica M. Nachtman