

February 28, 2025

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Change, and members of the committee:

This written testimony is submitted as a supplement to my oral testimony for HB1480. I urge a favorable report. This year is the third time that our committee has brought this bill in an effort to right the wrong that occurred in October of 2020, when several mental health therapists were abruptly fired from a child advocacy center, and given no opportunity to have proper closure with their clients.

Not only did this event require that the providers violate their ethical duty to care for their patients, but children who already had traumatic histories experienced the confusion of being abandoned by their trusted confidants.

There may be a question as to why the families who were impacted have not come forward. As part of those very same ethics, we as psychologists may not solicit testimony from patients, as there may be a power imbalance and conflict of interest. This has precluded the providers from reaching out to their former patients and asking them to tell their stories.

By sheer coincidence, I found myself in the company of a family who was impacted, and the relationship was non-therapeutic. Therefore, I was able to encourage them to testify. Attached you will find anonymous statements from the couple whose children were impacted by abrupt terminations at a child advocacy center in Maryland in 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. They confided in me and allowed me to tell their story. They have asked to remain anonymous in order to protect their children's privacy, and to avoid retaliatory action from said child advocacy center.

Signed,

Stephanie Olarte, PhD

Licensed Psychologist

Vice Chair, Legislative Committee

Maryland Psychological Association

Anonymous statement from parent A

My children were working with incredible therapists at a child advocacy center in Maryland. We had searched long and hard for therapists who could provide the type of therapy (trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy-TF-CBT) that they needed given their extensive trauma and abandonment histories. TF-CBT is phase oriented, meaning that there is an expectation it will last a certain number of sessions in order to be complete and effective. The predictability of this modality also supports children who have experienced trauma and benefit from structure and stability. My oldest was initially very resistant to therapy and guarded about opening up to anyone, but after weeks of meeting with his therapist, he began to trust her. He was moving into the trauma processing stage with his therapist, and was a few sessions into conversations about his trauma narrative. After weeks of building rapport with his therapist and coping strategies, he was moving on to where deeper healing work occurs. I was also receiving parent support therapy from my kid's therapists which was proving very helpful for managing the big stressors we were facing as a family. Unfortunately, both of my children, who had already experienced so many losses in their short lives, lost their therapists without any notice on the same day. We were informed by a phone call from the child advocacy center that the therapists had "left the agency" and appointments scheduled today and moving forward were canceled. We were not provided any explanation or opportunity for closure or final goodbye sessions. This was shocking and confusing to our whole family because the therapists had been so caring, professional, and supportive to all of us. We knew that they would not have intentionally abandoned our kids like that, especially given that a major trauma our kids experienced was abandonment by former caregivers, but we were not given an explanation as to what happened. This sudden and complete loss of therapists absolutely impacted our kids and me as a parent. We saw a resurgence in their trauma symptoms and they were confused and hurt by their therapists disappearing without explanation. It took weeks and countless phone calls to get a new therapist for our kids, but neither of my children or myself were able to build the trust needed with this new therapist and she also was not able to provide the same modality of therapy that had been working so well for my children. I support this bill because there is no reason for children and families who have already experienced trauma to suffer the unexplained loss of a therapist without an opportunity for closure and certainty of timely and comparable follow up care.

I am requesting this statement remain anonymous in order to protect the confidentiality of my children as it references their personal therapy and trauma. Additionally, intimidation tactics were previously used to silence me after our kids' therapists were terminated and as a result I fear retaliation for speaking publicly about this issue.

Anonymous statement from parent B

Over the last few years my partner and I decided to become licensed foster parents. After going through the licensing training and doing our own extensive research, we felt comfortable with the rewards and challenges that came with having kids through foster care. We were excited to grow our family and provide a safe, supportive space.

One of the challenges we knew we would face is supporting our children's mental health after experiencing so much trauma and the disruption of changing caregivers. These traumas manifested in behavioral challenges, made daily life difficult and, as a result, our whole family suffered. So we knew ensuring our children had consistent, trauma-informed therapy would be essential to our family's healing. That's why we felt some relief to find out there was space at a child advocacy center for our children to receive trauma-informed therapy. After the initial intakes, we were hopeful that this experience would put us and our children on the path to recovery and stability.

Once in a regular rhythm of therapy with this center, our connections as a family grew and our tools to manage behavioral challenges felt stronger. Some of the behavioral challenges continued but others subsided. And regardless of the challenges, we felt like we had the tools and relationships with the children's therapists to make the necessary growth and changes happen to heal. The consistency and reliability of therapy and the therapeutic relationships was essential to this healing. For the kids who've experienced abandonment, in order to heal, they needed therapists who were predictable and reliable. That was part of the healing process; to have a helpful authority figure in their lives who they could rely on. It also brought a sense of relief to my partner and I to know we had reliable support for the challenges we knew we'd experience day in and day out and that we had professional partners who were invested in the long haul to see our family's healing happen. Our therapists were some of the most committed, good-hearted people we've ever met. We knew they truly cared.

Suddenly our appointments were canceled unexpectedly despite having been confirmed a few days prior. We were then informed that we would no longer be able to receive therapy from our therapists and that there would be no opportunity for closure through a meeting, phone call, or writing. This experience had a negative impact on our entire family. Again, our kids were experiencing abandonment by adults they put their trust in to help them grow, irritating already delicate attachment and trust styles. Once again, my partner and I felt isolated; having lost a significant portion of our support network. We asked for support with this and were denied closure.

The management of the organizations that care for our state's most vulnerable refused to provide any sense or semblance of closure to children who were hurt coming into care and now have been hurt again. My partner and I were once again alone in our support of the children and felt like asking for help only caused more problems. The lack of care was disorientating. Our family continues to feel the repercussions of these events to this day. Our ability to believe these systems have the best interest of kids at heart has been severed. And that's a terrible shame.