

My name is Hera McLeod and I'm writing in support of SB25, "Family Law – Child Custody Evaluators – Qualifications and Trainings".

I'm an author, civil rights advocate, and leader in the technical industry. Years ago, I testified before the "Maryland Workgroup to Study Child Custody Court Proceedings Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence Allegations" and am encouraged that my home state continues its dedication and commitment to reforms that work to protect children.

In October of 2012, my son Prince was murdered by his father. His murder came on the heels of a year in family court where my attorneys presented terrifying evidence pointing to the dangerousness of Prince's father Joaquin Rams. Our custody evaluator heard testimony from several witnesses from Rams' life to include a Virginia police officer, the grandmother of his older son, and one of his ex-girlfriends – who all believed he routinely abused his older son and that he'd killed two people prior, in hopes of profiting from life insurance death benefits.

Our custody evaluator understood that Joaquin was dangerous, and believed he was suffering from psychological issues that would pose a danger to Prince; however, when she got on the stand, Rams' attorney tore apart her testimony. The attorney pointed out that the evaluator didn't have the appropriate training or credentials that would qualify her to assess his psychological functioning or to evaluate his dangerousness.

Our courts often rely on custody evaluators to assess the dangerousness of a parent - yet don't give them the tools to stand behind their assessments. Having evaluators gives the court a false sense that someone has investigated claims and evaluated evidence. Without giving these hard-working professionals the tools that they need to authentically carry out what they are charged to do, we're rendering them useless and a waste of taxpayer dollars. Because all it takes is one attorney to question their qualifications before the court realizes they need to outsource and add someone with the proper training and qualifications to evaluate.

Imagine how it must've felt for that evaluator in my son's case when she learned he'd been murdered. She, along with many others in the Montgomery County, MD court must live with wondering whether there was something they could have done to save Prince's life. And in her case, I sincerely hope that she knows how much I appreciate that she tried. My heart goes out to her in the knowledge that when her credibility was challenged, she'd been unable to point to job training she'd received that would've allowed her to stand behind her findings.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration. Please understand that for many children, family court is their last chance for safety and protection. I encourage you to vote in favor of SB25 because I truly believe it will add an essential layer of protection for Maryland's children – and it could be just the thing that saves the life of the next child.

Sincerely,  
Hera McLeod

Book: "Defying Silence: A Memoir of a Mother's Loss and Courage in the Face of Injustice"  
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