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**RE:      HOUSE BILL 233**

**OPPOSED**

**Dear Members of the House of Delegates:**

My name is Anastasia Prigge, and I am the Chief of the Special Victim's Unit at the Anne Arundel County State's Attorney's Office. I have been a prosecutor/Assistant State's Attorney for 27 years. I have spent the vast majority of my career fighting to eradicate child abuse as well as domestic violence. I am a member of our Multi-Disciplinary Team at the Anne Arundel County Child Advocacy Center and serve as a member of the executive leadership team. Our Multi-Disciplinary Team is comprised of Department of Social Services social workers, child abuse Detectives from the Anne Arundel County Police Department, therapists and medical personnel trained in child abuse. I am writing to strongly oppose House Bill 233 as I believe there would be unintended consequences if the bill were passed.

Sadly, most child abuse is committed by family members or household members. When child abuse occurs in a home, especially sexual child abuse, it does not come with an owner's manual on how to handle what is likely a family's worst nightmare. It is a common scenario where a non-offending caregiver must choose between the child abuser or a blameless child with no power. I wish I could say in my experience that parents or guardians always put the abused child's interests first, but that is simply not the case. Many times, the child is called a liar, and reports of abuse are ignored. The abuser is then free to continue the abuse. There are many reasons why this can happen. Often the non-offending caregiver is without financial resources or is also a victim of abuse. Sometimes the non-offending caregiver is uneducated about child abuse or in other instances the non-offending caregiver simply loves the offender and prefers to ignore a credible account of child abuse. In other scenarios, one of the siblings could be the abuser while the other is a victim, with parents determined to protect the offending child.

The problem with House Bill 233 is that it does not protect abused children. While parental and guardian rights are important, abusers could benefit from House Bill 233 by blocking and obstructing legitimate Department of Social Services investigations. This bill in practice alerts parents that there are allegations about abuse, most likely in the home. The parent could pressure the child not to cooperate. In these situations, the child is often completely unprotected and wholly without recourse to be free from abuse, which can be constant. House Bill 233 could cut off one of the last avenues a child has to stop the abuse. In one of my worst cases, there was an offender on COMET supervision for possessing child pornography while he was free to abuse his two daughters for years because they did not know who to turn to as their mother supported the abuser.

The Department of Social Services must be able to conduct meaningful investigations free from obstruction for the sake of protecting a child who otherwise is powerless and without a voice. When our Multi-Disciplinary Team encounters an uncooperative family when there is good reason to suspect there is child abuse occurring, it is imperative that the potentially abused child has an opportunity to disclose abuse, free from coercion. Otherwise, the abuse could simply continue unabated, sometimes for years. We have been able to send Department of Social Services forensic investigators to schools to talk to children who we suspect are being silenced at home. In those situations, abuse frequently has been disclosed, and we have been able to hold offenders accountable. In other situations, the child, once separated from the abuser and non-offending caregiver, has been able to provide information about safety plans that are being violated. It is not uncommon for the non-offending caregiver to move the abuser back into the home once the initial Department of Social Services investigation is over. In that scenario, it is not a stretch that the abuse could start again.

On behalf of the Executive Leadership Team of the Child Advocacy Center for Anne Arundel County, we implore you not to pass this bill which would hinder our ability to protect the most vulnerable children in the State of Maryland.

Sincerely,

s/s Anastasia T. Prigge