

POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: House Bill 223 - Know Before They Knock

FROM: Lucy Donofrio, LCSW-C

POSITION: Favorable

DATE: February 13, 2025

My name is Lucy Donofrio and I am a licensed clinical social worker. I work for the Maryland Office of the Public Defender's Parental Defense Division, however I am submitting this testimony on my personal behalf as a resident of Baltimore City. I am writing to urge a favorable report on House Bill 223.

I began my career working with young children, teenagers, and their families, providing therapeutic services aimed at enhancing not only the well-being of individuals but also the strength of our communities. I have dedicated myself to this work because I care deeply about people and their potential for growth and healing. Currently, I focus on supporting parents seeking to reunify with their children after separation, believing wholeheartedly that my efforts contribute to the overall well-being of families and, in turn, the health of our society.

It is a best standard of practice in social work to ensure that the people you interact with have an understanding of your role as the professional. Social workers value informed consent. By providing parents with clear information about their rights at the outset of an investigation, social workers conducting these investigations are more likely to fulfill their ethical obligation to families. Social workers can effectively fulfill their responsibility to protect children while also upholding their ethics—these two goals are not mutually exclusive.

When a child protective services (CPS) investigator arrives at a parent's door, an inherent power imbalance is present. A state agency is entering the home, which naturally creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, whether implicit or explicit. Parents have shared with me their feelings of confusion, fear, helplessness, and frustration during such encounters. They often feel powerless, unsure of what they are entitled to know, say, or express. Many worry that displaying any emotion could lead to being labeled as mentally ill or unstable, which could further jeopardize their situation. Additionally, parents are often unaware of their fundamental rights, nor do they understand the rights of their children. This lack of knowledge compounds the stress and uncertainty they face during an already difficult time.

Knowing their rights enables parents to engage with the Department of Social Services while still protecting their relationship with their children. This awareness can help them avoid situations where the investigation might lead to more harm than necessary or cause unnecessary separation from their children. I see the devastating impact of family separation on children and adults every day in my current role. These non-emergency reports need to be handled with care and responsibility so that families that need help get help, without traumatizing them.

I urge you to issue a favorable report on HB223.