

Written Testimony in Support of HB0944
Family Law - Children in Need of Assistance and Termination of Parental Rights
Submitted to the House Judiciary Committee
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Dear Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

Today I am writing in **strong support of HB0944**, a bill that supports Maryland families by preventing unnecessary termination of parental rights (TPR). Research has shown that families who experience TPR, regardless of whether or not an adoption or guardianship for a child has occurred, live with a lifetime of grief, loss, and identity struggles. I submit this testimony as an individual with over 15 years of experience working with child welfare-involved families, where I have witnessed firsthand the complexities, challenges, and long-term consequences of TPR decisions from all angles.

Throughout my career, I have worked closely with families impacted by TPR including advocating for TPRs to be brought forward to secure permanency for children who are unable to go home, testifying in trials on behalf of children and parents against TPRs, and as a therapist working with individuals who had experienced a TPR. Through these experiences, I have seen the pain that comes with TPR decisions - a pain that continues throughout the lifecycle and may occur again and again for families who continue to have children while involved with child welfare services.

As a social worker who specializes in this field, I know that many parents have children early in life, or during a difficult time, may not be able to care for them. However, we are not who we were on our worst days, and it is unfair to use the loss of a former child to TPR, regardless of circumstance, to permanently separate another child from their parent. A parent may be in a very different position and perfectly capable of parenting a new child who deserves the opportunity to be parented by their biological parent.

As an example, when I was running a child welfare permanency program, a 10-year-old boy was placed in a pre-adoptive home. He had a strong relationship with his biological mother who had him as a teenager, but had been unable to care for him due to housing concerns and substance abuse. As he was stable where he lived for a few years and wanted to be adopted by his pre-adoptive family a judge ordered a TPR. About two years later, his sister Gina (name changed for confidentiality) was born and immediately brought to the attention of the child welfare agency. His mother had been in recovery for a year, was living in stable housing with the baby's father, and was doing quite well. When her daughter came to the attention of my foster care program with a goal of adoption, despite a mother cooperating with all service plan goals with a strong drive and desire to parent her daughter, we fought in court to reunify the family. As of the last time I heard, six years later, the family was stable, Gina was thriving and had no incidents of child welfare agency involvement since. If the dependency court had in fact acted under the sibling bypass to TPR without reasonable efforts as the law states, Gina would have grown up separated from her parents and likely adopted into a different family from her brother.

In conclusion, HB0944 is an essential step in recognizing that circumstances change, and parents who have demonstrated growth and stability deserve consideration for future parenting opportunities. I urge the committee to pass this bill to ensure that our child welfare system evolves to be more equitable, compassionate, and responsive to the realities of family life. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

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