

Erika Whitney Young

Baltimore, Maryland

HB1490

Favorable Testimony

I am writing in support of HB 1490 to address the barriers survivors of domestic violence face when seeking Temporary Cash Assistance. When I fled severe domestic violence, I did what our system asks survivors to do: I went to the Department of Social Services and the child support office to apply for help so that I could keep my family safe. At the time, I had two black eyes from being beaten. The injuries were so severe that it took nearly seven months for them to fully heal. Despite the visible evidence of the violence I had endured, I was still expected to cooperate with the child support process or get a protective order to be able to receive assistance. Being forced to navigate that system while still in crisis was retraumatizing and frightening.

For survivors, pursuing child support can put us directly back in harm's way. The person we are trying to escape may become aware of our location, retaliate, or escalate their abuse. When access to basic financial support is conditioned on cooperating with child support, survivors are forced to choose between safety and survival. In practice, the current system creates inequities because decisions about "good cause" exemptions are inconsistent and often depend on the discretion of individual caseworkers. Survivors who are already traumatized should not have to prove, again and again, why protecting themselves and their children matters.

HB 1490 will help correct these disparities by clarifying that the Department of Social Services—not the child support agency—is responsible for granting good cause. The bill also limits unnecessary caseworker discretion that can result in denials even when safety concerns are clear. By standardizing the process and requiring that families be notified about good cause exemptions at the time of application, during interviews, and in official notices, this legislation ensures that survivors actually know their rights and how to access protections that already exist.

Importantly, HB 1490 codifies and expands Maryland's good cause exemptions, including for survivors facing domestic violence or other safety concerns, children conceived through rape or incest, pending adoption proceedings, and situations where filing for child support could harm a child's relationship with a noncustodial parent who provides emotional or other forms of support. This bill gives parents the autonomy to determine what is truly in their family's best interest. Survivors seeking Temporary Cash Assistance should not be punished for prioritizing safety. Passing HB 1490 will create a clearer, more humane system that supports families when they need it most.