



Date: 2-26-26

Judicial Proceedings Committee

Senate Bill 650-Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations ("Know Before They Knock" Family Right to Notice Act)

Position: Unfavorable

Dear Chair Smith and Committee Members,

On behalf of the Center for Hope, we respectfully submit this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 650. The Center for Hope works every day with children and families impacted by abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. We partner closely with child advocacy centers, healthcare providers, law enforcement, and child protective services to ensure that children who are at risk receive timely, trauma-informed, and coordinated intervention. For these reasons, we have serious concerns regarding SB 650.

The bill would require investigators to inform parents or legal guardians that they are not required to:

- Permit interviews or examinations of a child absent a court order or statutory exception.

While framed as a clarification of parental rights, this mandate will function in practice as an invitation to refuse cooperation at the earliest stage of an investigation. In cases where abuse or neglect may be occurring, even short delays can significantly increase risk. The reality of child maltreatment is stark. Nationally, approximately 2,000 children die each year from abuse and neglect, the majority of whom are infants and toddlers who cannot advocate for themselves. Many fatalities involve neglect—situations where basic needs were unmet or where escalating danger was not addressed in time. When access to a child is delayed, the window for intervention narrows.

This legislation prioritizes the procedural rights of adults over the safety and human rights of children. By centering the right to refuse to let CPS interview a child, the bill effectively strengthens the position of potentially abusive caregivers while offering no parallel safeguard to ensure the child's voice is heard.

Children are independent rights-holders. They are not extensions of parental authority. Any statutory change affecting child protection should begin from the principle that the child's safety is paramount. SB 650 inverts that framework. The Office of the Public Defender has encouraged parents to assert their rights and, in some cases, to instruct their children not to speak with CPS. If this bill becomes law, it will formalize that adversarial approach at the very start of an investigation. Experience from prior legislative proposals and related public testimony demonstrates that measures emphasizing refusal rights often encourage a defensive posture at the outset of investigations. The involvement of legal advisories encouraging parents to decline access further underscores this dynamic. If enacted, SB 650 would formalize an adversarial starting point—one



defined by warnings, refusals, and confrontation—rather than collaboration focused on ensuring child safety. That shift undermines the trauma-informed, multidisciplinary model Maryland has worked to strengthen. When investigators cannot promptly assess a child’s safety or living environment, they are more likely to:

- Seek emergency court orders;
- Escalate cases more quickly; and
- Pursue removal when judicial involvement heightens perceived risk.

Instead of reducing unnecessary system involvement, SB 650 may increase the number of children brought before the court and placed outside their homes due to uncertainty and delayed access. At its core, the bill will likely;

- Encourages refusal and secrecy at the outset of investigations;
- Provides procedural leverage to adults who may be responsible for harm;
- Ignores the child’s right to safety and independent protection; and
- Risks delays in interventions that can be life-saving.

Maryland should be strengthening its child protection framework, not introducing statutory barriers that complicate timely assessment and response. *For these reasons, the Center for Hope respectfully urges an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 650.* Child safety must remain the first and guiding principle of our child welfare laws.

Respectfully,

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