



Ending the cycle of violence for survivors and children through pro bono legal aid

BILL NO: Senate Bill 433

TITLE: Family Law - Temporary and Final Protective Orders - Duration and Relief

COMMITTEE: Judicial Proceedings

HEARING DATE: February 10, 2026

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Volunteer Legal Advocates, formerly DC Volunteer Lawyers Project, was founded in 2008 to provide high quality, pro bono legal services to survivors of domestic violence, immigrant survivors of gender-based violence, and vulnerable children. We use an innovative volunteer lawyer model where we train and supervise pro bono lawyers to broaden our impact. In 2025, over 600 lawyers volunteered with us, contributing \$23M in free legal services. Together we provided legal assistance and support to over 3,000 adults and children.

In January 2023 we expanded our domestic violence services into Montgomery County, where our team of three lawyers, one client advocate, and one program coordinator operates out of the Family Justice Center in Rockville. We have a weekly domestic violence walk-in clinic at the Rockville Memorial Library each Wednesday afternoon, and after conversations with the Self-Help Center and Family Justice Center about their capacity issues, we have started a twice-monthly clinic where we help unrepresented domestic violence survivors complete forms in family law cases. Since we opened our Maryland office has served 726 clients in family law and domestic violence matters, with the help of 82 volunteer attorneys, and we've handled 151 protective order cases.

Volunteer Legal Advocates urges the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 433.

Senate Bill 433 would do two things. First, it would lengthen the time between a temporary order of protection (TPO) hearing and the final protective order (FPO) hearing. Second, it would add reimbursement for financial loss incurred by the petitioner due to the respondent's acts to the possible relief a court can grant in a final order of protection. This testimony will focus on the relief issue.

Volunteer Legal Advocates strongly supports spelling out in the statute the possible relief a court can order if it grants an FPO. We know that some courts and judges feel they are constrained from granting any relief that is not specified in the Maryland Code. Many states explicitly provide that a court can order payment for financial loss. By adding this form of relief to Maryland law it will allow survivors to make repairs, buy a

5335 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Ste. 440
Washington, DC 20015
202-885-5542

600 Jefferson Plaza, Ste. 500
Rockville, MD 20852
202-464-1700

info@volunteerlegaladvocates.org | www.VolunteerLegalAdvocates.org

new phone (this is a particularly frequent form of damage in these cases), and have the respondent pay for it when the cost is incurred, rather than waiting perhaps more than a year for a divorce hearing, or having to sue the respondent in small claims court, which is burdensome for a survivor. And while Maryland provides compensation to crime victims in other ways, the process can take a long time. The ability to obtain funds quickly can be particularly crucial for low-income survivors who have immediate needs, like replacing a damaged phone.

Spelling out the available forms of relief for domestic violence survivors directly in statute is particularly helpful for *pro se* litigants because it increases clarity, accessibility, and fairness in a system where many survivors appear in court without legal representation. Clear statutory language provides notice. *Pro se* litigants often do not know what relief the court is authorized to grant or what they are permitted to request. When forms of relief are explicitly listed in the statute, survivors can more readily understand the full scope of protections available to them. This reduces the risk that critical safety-related relief goes unrequested simply because the survivor was unaware it existed.

Enumerated relief also promotes meaningful access to justice. Survivors navigating the legal system without counsel must rely heavily on plain statutory language, court forms, and limited guidance from court staff. When relief options are clearly articulated in the statute, survivors are better able to prepare their cases, complete forms accurately, and articulate their needs to the court. This helps level the playing field between represented and unrepresented parties.

Finally, clearly defined relief supports trauma-informed proceedings. Survivors experiencing trauma may have difficulty identifying or articulating all of the protections they need in the moment. When the statute itself identifies common and appropriate forms of relief, it helps survivors recognize and request protections that directly address their safety, housing stability, and family needs, even if those needs are not immediately obvious to them.

For these reasons, **Volunteer Legal Advocates urges a favorable report on SB 433.**