

FAVORABLE REPORT on THE PATH ACT HB0084

Dear Chair Delegate J. Sandy Bartlett and Vice Chair Delegate Debra M. Davis and members of the Judicial Committee,

My name is Sonja Owens, and I am a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) and the President of Helping Ourselves to Transform. In my work with women who have experienced domestic violence and trauma, I have seen a troubling rise in financial abuse connected to domestic violence.

Many women share that their partners convince them not to work and instead stay home to care for the house and children. They are promised financial support so they “do not have to worry.” What begins as help often turns into control.

In reality, these women are often trapped. They are talked down to and abused physically, emotionally, and financially. When they do not do what their partner wants, money is taken away. They are told they do not deserve money, do not need it, and that everything they need will be provided for them. This leaves them dependent and unable to leave.

This abuse can grow into forced criminal behavior. I worked with a client who managed rental payments and took deposits to the bank. When her partner learned she had access to the account, he forced her to steal money from it. She did this because she was afraid she would be beaten if she refused.

These stories are not rare. More women are coming into therapy and sharing similar experiences of financial control, threats, violence, and sexual abuse. These cases show

that

financial abuse is a form of domestic violence and is used to maintain power and control over survivors.

It is important to clearly state what the PATH Act does and does not do. The PATH Act does not protect rapists or child molesters. While the bill recognizes that some survivors may have experienced rape or sexual assault, it clearly says that PATH mitigation does not apply to those crimes. The law excludes Sexual Crimes and Abuse and Other Offensive Conduct, which includes child abuse and sexual abuse of a minor. This means that people convicted of those crimes are not eligible for relief under this law.

The PATH Act is narrowly focused on allowing courts to consider proven domestic violence as a mitigating factor in eligible cases. It includes strong safeguards: it does not create a defense, it does not reduce victims' rights, and it requires judges to explain their decisions on the record.

I share this testimony to show the serious harm caused by financial abuse and to stress the need for laws that respond with understanding and proper support instead of punishment.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today.

Sonja Owens,

LCPC

President of Helping Ourselves to Transom