



March 13, 2026

To: House Judiciary Committee

Reference: House Bill 1586-Protective Orders - Coercive Control

Position: Unfavorable

Dear Chair Bartlett and members of the House Judiciary Committee:

On behalf of Center for Hope, the comprehensive violence intervention and prevention program of LifeBridge Health, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 1586. Center for Hope works with survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking, and we recognize that coercive control is a serious and harmful form of abuse that many survivors experience. While the intent of this legislation is understandable, Center for Hope respectfully urges an unfavorable report on HB 1586 because of significant concerns regarding implementation, unintended consequences, and the potential for harm to survivors.

First, it is undeniable that coercive control is a devastating form of intimate partner violence. However, advocates and practitioners widely recognize that codifying coercive control within protective order statutes would not meaningfully improve the courts' ability to recognize or respond to survivors' experiences of abuse. While the bill appears helpful in theory, there are real concerns about how it would function in practice within Maryland's current legal framework.

Protective orders are intended to be an extraordinary legal remedy for situations involving a serious risk of physical violence. The language proposed in HB 1586 is overly broad and potentially over-inclusive in determining who may be eligible for a protective order. As drafted, the bill could be interpreted to include certain relationship conflicts that do not rise to the level of domestic violence. At the same time, many situations involving threats that place a victim in fear of imminent serious bodily harm are already covered under existing law.

Second, codifying coercive control in statute could increase the likelihood that the legal system is weaponized against survivors. Unfortunately, advocates are seeing a growing number of cases where abusers manipulate the court system by filing protective orders against the survivor and claiming to be the victim. This form of legal abuse allows abusers to continue exerting control, further isolating and victimizing survivors. Expanding the statutory definition of abuse to include coercive control may unintentionally make it easier for abusers to exploit the protective order process.

Third, the bill's broad language makes findings of coercive control highly context-dependent and difficult to prove. Coercive control often requires a detailed pattern-of-behavior analysis and a significant breadth of evidence to fully demonstrate. Maryland's current protective order process, which is designed to address urgent safety concerns in a short timeframe, is not well equipped to

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adjudicate these complex dynamics. As a result, protective orders may only be granted in the most extreme cases, which risks normalizing lower levels of abuse and minimizing survivors' lived experiences.

If the General Assembly wishes to address coercive control in statute, Center for Hope respectfully suggests a more measured approach. Rather than expanding the statutory definition of abuse, the legislature could instead direct courts to consider evidence of coercive control when evaluating protective order petitions. This approach would help educate the bench on the pervasive nature of coercive control in intimate partner violence cases while allowing courts to evaluate abusive conduct within its full context without diluting the protective order statute or creating unintended harms.

While coercive control laws may appear to address gaps in the current system, in practice they risk widening those gaps and harming survivors. Without broader systemic reforms and increased recognition of the power and control dynamics present in domestic violence cases, codifying coercive control in this way could produce outcomes that undermine survivor safety.

For these reasons, Center for Hope respectfully requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 1586.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to supporting survivors of violence.

Respectfully submitted,
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