

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

House Bill 890: "Know Before They Knock" Family Right to Notice Act *Family Law – Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations*

****OPPOSE****

I am Mary Jo Buchanan, a retired social worker with 45 years of service to children, youth and families. I have served on the front lines as a social worker and as an Executive Director/CEO of several child serving nonprofits.

I oppose House Bill 890 as I am first and foremost concerned with the safety of the child. This simple focus has guided me throughout my career and why I am here to express grave concerns over the proposed provision: "(E) (1) (IV) THE PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN IS NOT REQUIRED TO ALLOW THE EMPLOYEE OF THE DEPARTMENT OR THE LOCAL DEPARTMENT TO INTERVIEW OR EXAMINE A CHILD, UNLESS THE INTERVIEW OR EXAMINATION IS ORDERED BY A COURT OR IS REQUIRED UNDER SUBSECTION (C) OR (K) OF THIS SECTION."

I believe the safety of the child is absolutely paramount and want to share an example of how precarious that can be. When my agency received a referral for outreach to a family to offer service, we sent out a care manager to learn how we could assist. While the parents expressed interest in our services, which were voluntary, they refused to let the care manager see their child. This was puzzling to our care manager as our protocol is always to meet in person with the family and to 'lay eyes' on the child and do a full assessment of needs to see how we can help. In spite of the care manager's explanation about the need to meet in person with all involved, including the children, the parents still refused that access.

Because of this concern, we involved our child welfare partners, who then involved law enforcement.

What we discovered when we finally laid eyes on all of the children will haunt me for the rest of my life.

In the basement, we found their 9-year-old chained to a metal bed. The bed was bare except for a hard mattress. It reeked of urine and feces. The child was extremely malnourished, severely underweight, his hair matted and covered in feces and urine. It was obvious that he had not been bathed for quite some time. There was no evidence of food and for water, the child had a dog bowl. There was no light in the basement except for a nightlight. This child had no activities, no tv or books to read. The only exception were two coloring books and crayons. As we could tell from the teeth marks, that he had tried to eat the crayons because he was so hungry.

It was truly the most horrific scene that I had ever witnessed in my social work career. What haunts me still is that any further delay in our finally seeing this child may have resulted in his death.

That is why I'm here today urging you to oppose any delay, especially if a parent or caregiver is has the ability to deny access to see and examine the child, which this bill includes. While I absolutely respect parental rights, they must never come before the safety of a child. This bill in my opinion, has the potential for catastrophic outcomes for children, at a time when they are potentially most vulnerable or at worse, in danger.

I will continue for the rest of my days to hear the voice of this child, who in a very quiet, almost inaudible whisper, said thank you for finally coming to help me. And I will always remember that had it not been for the ability to lay eyes on that child, that his voice may have been silenced.

My hope is that you too will remember his voice and the voices of all children who need our protection and care. And that you will act accordingly to oppose this bill.

Thank you.



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