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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1586**

**Protective Orders – Coercive Control**

The Duluth Domestic Violence Power and Control Wheel (1984) is a great tool to help victims of abuse to understand the Power and Control dynamic. Although the perimeter of the Wheel represents those forms of abuse (Physical and Sexual) which seem to be most often in the public eye, the inner workings of the Wheel outline the many forms that abuse can take. For those suffering from coercive control, Control is at the core of the abuse cycle. The strategies and methods abusers implement are among the “spokes” of the Wheel that represent the victimization of those who have lost their ability to live without fear of reprisal, domination, intimidation, isolation, and economic and emotional abuse. The earliest version of this Bill heard in 2023 lacked a definition that resounded with the Judiciary Committee.

In 2024, HB 1290 included the definition for “Coercive Control” as recorded in Maryland Rule 9-205 (December 2022): [A] a pattern of emotional or psychological manipulation, maltreatment, threats of force or intimidation used to compel an individual to act or refrain from acting against the individual’s will.” Despite the legal definition as set forth in the Rules and included in HB1290, there were those who opined that the definition remained too vague.

With that in mind, HB1586 has expanded the definition to provide the Court with examples as set forth in the California protective order statute within their Family Code article. As of 2024, nine (9) states have codified “coercive control” in their family, criminal and/or protective order statutes. Although already defined in its family court act, New York is currently considering “coercive control” in its statute for an order of protection.

It is time to recognize Coercive Control as that which robs the victim of their power to make decisions about something as simple as what to wear, how to talk, and what time to go to and from daily activities. "Life" for the coercively controlled abuse victim gradually becomes so confining and manipulated that the abuser has all the power over them; the victim has no personal freedom whatsoever. The home, in fact, becomes a form of confinement and isolation from others--- a prison for the victim at the hands of the manipulator.

Victims of coercive control often have no physical signs of abuse. They frequently do not have bruises, cuts, broken bones, or other outward signs. They are told when, how and why to do something. Sometimes their food is withheld because they did not comply with some controlling edict. Their activities on the phone or computer are thoroughly scrutinized and sometimes cut off completely. Email, text, and social media are often forbidden as it represents an avenue of communication with the outside world the abuser cannot fully control. They simply have no autonomy. Imagine living that way day to day. Someone tells you how, when, where or even IF you can go. If you fail to follow the edicts, there are severe consequences suffered by the victim, their pets, their children, or their loved ones.

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, it takes a victim seven attempts to fully leave an abusive relationship. These statistics often raise the question as to why it is so hard to leave. Domestic violence was once thought to be an anger management issue. It is now recognized that at the core, the abusers have a sense of entitlement and a belief that they SHOULD be in control.

**HOUSE BILL 1586** recognizes the domination and control of the victim through coercive behavior that strips the abused of their ability and freedom to make self-effectuating decisions. **HB1586** recognizes coercion as abuse and gives the victim an outlet from the controlling behaviors that rob them of their own "self-will" and provides them with a path to escape their abuser.

**PLEASE ENTER A FAVORABLE REPORT FOR HB 1586**

Thank you, Madame Chair and Fellow Committee Members.

***Susan K. McComas***