

## **Testimony in Support of HB1586**

Dear Distinguished Members of the Legislature, Victims-Survivors, and Allies:

I write today to urge your support of HB1586, legislation that would extend meaningful protections to victims of both physical and non-physical abuse.

Coercive control — now recognized as the foundation of virtually all domestic abuse — is the systematic exertion of power over another person. It does not end when a relationship ends. It crosses time and space, infiltrating every aspect of a victim's life. Physical violence is not its defining characteristic, and we can no longer afford to treat it as such.

Abusers use coercion, intimidation, isolation, gaslighting, and manipulation to wage what can only be described as psychological warfare — a private terror that victims often cannot name, because we as a society have trained ourselves to look for bruises. As Dr. Evan Stark puts it, coercive control is like carpenter ants devouring the foundation of a house: the damage is catastrophic long before it becomes visible.

I say this not as an outside observer. I was a victims' advocate at nineteen. I have spent my career in child welfare, social work, therapy, and education — specifically on the dynamics of domestic abuse. And still, I did not recognize the abuse in my own relationship. That is not a personal failing. It is the predictable result of a system that continues to define abuse through the narrow lens of physical violence.

The research is unambiguous. Coercive control underlies all forms of domestic abuse. When physical violence does occur, it is frequently a last resort — deployed when psychological tactics alone no longer suffice. A review of 358 homicides in the United Kingdom found that controlling or obsessive behaviors were present in 92–94% of cases. We know that abuse intensifies after separation. We know that what courts often label "high-conflict" cases are more accurately cases featuring one party who is drawn to conflict — post-separation abuse by another name.

We tell victims to leave. But we do not make it safe for them to do so. And when the legal system fails to recognize these harms, it compounds the injury — a betrayal by the very institutions meant to provide protection.

Abusers are skilled at concealment. They present as charming, credible, even sympathetic. They deny wrongdoing, deflect blame, and reverse the roles of victim and offender — a pattern researchers call DARVO. Albert Biderman's foundational research on coercion under totalitarian

regimes demonstrated how sustained psychological pressure erodes a person's sense of self and autonomy. His Coercion Chart has since become a model for understanding what happens behind closed doors in abusive homes.

Coercive control is rooted in patriarchal structures that normalize men's power over women. While men and members of the LGBTQ+ community also experience this abuse, women bear the overwhelming burden — a disparity we must name honestly.

Victims and their children are waiting to be seen. It is time for Maryland to look beyond the violent incident model and pass HB1586.

### **Christine M. Cocchiola, DSW, LCSW**

Christine M. Cocchiola, DSW, LCSW, is a recognized expert on coercive control and its impact on adult and child victims. As a college professor of social work, she earned her Doctorate in Clinical Social Work from New York University, where she was mentored by Dr. Evan Stark, a leading authority on coercive control.

Dr. Cocchiola presents internationally on the dynamics of coercive control, educating professionals, advocates, and protective parents about children's lived experiences and the most effective intervention strategies for victims of abuse. A social justice advocate since age 19, she developed The Protective Parenting Program, an evidence-based, attachment-focused therapeutic model designed for parents whose children have been harmed by abusive partners.

As both a survivor and protective parent, Dr. Cocchiola brings personal insight to her professional work. She is the author of the children's book *Every Moment of Every Day* and co-author of *FRAMED: Women in the Family Court Underworld*. Her TEDx talk with over 1.4 M views, "It is ALL Coercive Control," is available on YouTube.

