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State Representative

43rd District

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H.B. 508

House Civil Justice Committee

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on HB508.

First, there are numerous reasons the time is now to do away with our outdated system for allocating parental rights in Ohio. Here are just a few:

- There is a very large and growing body of scientific literature that indicates that children of divorced parents fare best when the parents equally share the roles and responsibilities of parenthood, in the vast majority of cases. The sharing of parental roles and responsibilities promotes an increased sense of security and safety for children; better achievement and attendance in school; decrease in poverty; lower levels of risky behaviors such as delinquency, heavy drinking, drug use and early sexual activity; and increases parental harmony.
- Fewer parents are getting married and staying married than ever before in Ohio. Cleveland, Toledo, and Dayton are top in the nation for percentage of single parent households, with mothers typically bearing the sole responsibility of raising the children as custodial parents.
- Despite the data showing that fathers are capable of bonding with their children and raising them, fathers are rarely custodial parents. By sidelining fathers in such large numbers, we have hundreds of thousands of Ohio children who are living dad-deprived lives. Research has shown that children without an involved father are at risk to themselves and society.
- Equal parenting legislation is being introduced and passed nationwide. Kentucky (2018) and Arkansas (2021) were the first with equal presumptions, and both had bipartisan support and passed quickly and with little to no opposition. West Virginia is looking to pass theirs any day, and dozens of other states are working on their own bills right now. Ohio needs to be a leader and not wait for everyone else before doing the right thing for our families.

Second, I want to address a few common concerns about equal parenting:

- There's a concern that an equal presumption would create a "cookie-cutter" approach to custody. However, Ohio already uses a statutory "cookie-cutter" approach with the standard parenting time. With this bill, courts must still review the merits on a case-by-case basis to determine whether the equal presumption is appropriate.
- There's a concern that equal parenting isn't appropriate when parents don't agree or are in conflict. Research has shown the opposite; that equal parenting provides a sense of balance to the child's world and gives them security even when there's parental conflict. Equal parenting has also been shown to reduce parental conflict and encourage collaboration between parents.
- There's a concern that this bill will force courts to give equal custody to abusers. That is precisely why the bill allows the presumptions to be rebutted when there is evidence of domestic violence, abuse, parental kidnapping, or neglect, using the same factors that exist under current law. In other words, an unfit parent now will still be deemed unfit under HB508.

Finally, I want to linger on one last point: unequal parenting arrangements do NOT make children safer. A parent intent on harming their child is not going to be prevented by any parenting time arrangement. What the standard parenting guidelines do in most counties is to sideline fit, loving parents that pose no danger whatsoever to their children. In other words, if a parent is deemed fit enough to be granted standard parenting time, that same parent is fit enough for equal parenting time. Let's stop the ruse of pretending that a fit, loving parent is safe to enjoy 48 unsupervised hours with their child, but not a minute more.

By moving us past the false sense of security – the *illusion* of safety – of the unequal parenting status quo, our legislation ensures the best outcomes for children in cases when both parents are capable of caring for their children. No fit, loving parent should be relegated to the periphery of their child's life just because they are no longer in a relationship with the other parent. HB508 is an opportunity to make our communities stronger while moving us ever closer to justice for all.

Thank you for your consideration and with that we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.