

PROPONENT TESTIMONY - HB508

TESTIMONY OF Christopher Brown, MD, MPH

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CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 134TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

MARCH 8, 2022

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

I am Christopher Brown MD, MPH a physician and parent who lives in Westerville Ohio.

I am a single parent of two daughters age 20 and 17. I have had the experience of negotiating custody through the Family Court system.

HB 508 is important to Ohio in that it provides a level of parenting equity that will not only encourage participation in the parenting process, but will also provide a level of parity between the parents and allow them to participate equally in the decision-making for their child. Based on my experience in being a single parent this bill will help provide equal access to each parent to each child. It also rightfully assumes that both parents are equally important in the parenting process and equally capable in parenting.

I grew up in a two parent home and was raised to have an overall belief in our system of governance, within limits. While we all knew that it wasn't perfect we also knew that the majority of time if you're doing the right thing that things will work out. That view changed with my immersion into the family court system.

My child's mother and I were never married, but were in a relationship. Despite not living in the same town I went with her to prenatal visits and went on shopping trips to get items in anticipation of our coming child. My training separated us, but nonetheless upon hearing she was in labor I booked a flight and traveled to my child's birth. After my daughter was born I set up a bank account in her name and gave the debit card to her mother and deposited an agreed upon amount on a monthly basis for her use. Like a lot of men I assumed being there and signing the birth certificate made me my child's father in the way that I grew up and was familiar Little did I know that nothing can be further from the truth. Like a slave in the antebellum south I would have responsibilities and would be counted from a financial perspective, but I would have no rights other than to toil for the exclusive benefit of another.

This bill matters to me as I had to spend significant time and resources in order to achieve shared parenting and equal parenting time. This required me to go through having my children denied to me over a Christmas holiday and various violation of our initial agreement as well as multiple requests from my children before this could be achieved. The impetus for the increase in time was in part from a request from my children to spend time overnight which was repeatedly denied by the other parent. I was also not included as emergency contact on school forms and even documented an attempt to change my child's name on official school documentation. With proper documentation of repeat violations of our agreement I was able to motion for increased time with my children. As a physician I was fortunate in this endeavor as I could afford quality attorneys to guide me through this process. Even though I was successful in my multiple attempts at increasing time with my children I can attribute a significant part of this to being able to afford attorneys while continuing to pay child support (even after reaching a 50/50 parenting time agreement). This bill will help level the playing field for parents who can't afford the cost of attorneys and negotiate repeat time off necessary to be successful in court while continuing to pay the other parent who will have access to a court appointed attorney for violating parenting agreements.

HB508 will be especially important in the African American community which has a disproportionate number of single parent households and suffers from a lack of involvement from African American fathers. As a AA man I did not want to have my personal affairs attended by the court system. I associated going to court with criminality and wrongdoing and since I was doing the "right thing" I didn't see a need to approach the system. Sadly I have seen numerous situations and heard the frustration of men who not having the benefit of legal counsel make the same presumptions only to become frustrated and for some to give up as it is time consuming and expensive to engage in legal entanglements for something you assumed you have a right to.

Increased parenting time allowed me to be more active in my children's lives. Although it was frequently stressful as a single physician parent it allowed me more access to information about their education and extracurricular activities. I was able to advocate for my oldest child to be placed in honors classes after realizing that she was not being challenged by her work. I was able to teach both of my children to ride a bike. I was able to be available when my daughter had a negative relationship with her step-father and able to change to full custody.

Is the current system which holds a parent, a man responsible but not give him any rights any different than founder Calhoun who wanted to count a slave in an American system that he had no rights in? The current system is a family destroying institution with particular effectiveness in the African American community. HB508 is step in the direction of rectifying this system to bring equity and fairness to parenting and hopefully to help heal all families, but especially the hard hit African American family.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you again for allowing me to provide testimony on HB 508. I would be happy to answer any questions.