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May 24, 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to address you and to provide testimony relative to HB 508. I am a self-employed attorney with my office located in Franklin County Ohio, although I have practiced in many counties in Ohio over my 26+ year span as a domestic relations attorney – primarily practicing as a Guardian ad Litem.

It is my understanding that supporters of the bill are concerned about false allegations of abuse being made against a parent by the other parent, which would then jeopardize their ability to parent their child(ren). While I am aware from my years of experience that this has and does in fact occur, it is my experience that it is not as common as believed, and that the Judges and Magistrates who rule on these matters are experienced enough to know what to look for in the parents' allegations, and thus make decisions that are in the child(ren)'s best interest. I see this Bill as protecting the parents' rights over the rights of the children which is a mistake and can be catastrophic for many children.

I have read the testimony submitted by the OCDA and I whole heartedly agree with their concerns regarding unwed parents. Their concerns center around the default shared parenting and equal time whether or not paternity has been established, the default parenting regardless of the age of the children and the relationship (or complete lack thereof) between the father and the child prior to the order, and the fact that mothers may not seek to establish the father-child relationship when the child is older and has no relationship with the father. Those are huge concerns for a large population of children.

Additionally, there is a great deal of concern for children of divorce. Divorce and custody litigation can be traumatic for children. While it is also traumatic for parents, sometimes parents lose sight of whose needs should be the priority. Modifying the custody law to be parent centric rather than child centric dangerously shifts the focus of the litigation to the needs and wants of adults from the needs and interests of the children, who tend to be the most vulnerable and have a limited ability to protect themselves. It is hard to be a child of parents in different homes and to figure out how to have good, strong relationships with both parents while also trying to focus on the business of just being a child. Children say it best. Some thoughts of children shared during interviews for custody litigation are as follows:

- It's too hard to love both of them at the same time.
- I can't keep track of my homework and school things when I'm always switching homes.
- My friends don't know where to find me.
- Dad/Mom won't take me to my activities.
- It's embarrassing when I'm always late coming from that home.
- I'm an athlete and Dad/Mom won't buy me the food I need to be at my best.
- I have to haul my entire wardrobe between homes and I hate that.
- I'm scared when I'm there and I don't know why.
- I think I should change schools every year between Mom and Dad's school districts because maybe then they will stop fighting.
- I want your help, but I don't want my parents to know how I feel because it might hurt their feelings.

There are many kiddos who have mental health issues including severe anxiety, depression and autism who cannot tolerate certain schedules, parenting styles, and transitions and many who are sadly, unable to vocalize their needs. There are parents who easily become frustrated with these children, either from a lack of understanding or denial, and so these children will no doubt suffer.

Not only do I have professional experience in the role of a GAL, but unfortunately I am also a divorced mother of two children. If HB 508 would have been enacted prior to the termination of my marriage, and if my ex-husband had chosen to fight me, my children would have been spending half of their time, and riding in a vehicle with an alcoholic. Fortunately for my ex, he never received a DUI, got into an accident, nor had any employment issues or police involvement regarding substance abuse prior to the termination of our marriage but he has since lost his job and undergone a liver transplant due to alcoholism. Essentially, had he chosen to fight me, it would have been my word against his and while my children love him, they would have been placed in life threatening danger every time they were with him until their best interests could have been investigated. Judges, Magistrates and Guardians have training, knowledge, experience and yes, gut feelings when it comes to people and the words they put in writing when "fighting" for custody and time with their children. If they get it wrong sometimes, it is because they err on the side of caution and allow a trained GAL to do their job, which is to protect the children's interests. In my 26+ years of practicing domestic law and being a GAL I have had three mothers die from alcoholism. Had those mothers automatically been granted equal parenting time – or even unsupervised time – those children could very well be dead as well.

I am certain that sometimes children are wrongly deprived of equal time with one of their parents when the parents split up and the courts become involved, either because a parent withholds the children

before the court issues a decision, or because the court is being cautious (this affects fathers and mothers), however, these situations are typically remedied pretty quickly with the help of a GAL. This bill could and would do irreparable damage to many kiddos and from how I understand the process, could end up costing the parents a great deal more financially than the current process already costs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony to you on this very important topic.

Sincerely,

Meredith A. Snyder


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