

**Ohio House of Representatives
Families and Aging Committee
Testimony of Bridget Mahoney
March 21, 2022
Ohio House Bill 14**

Chairman Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Bridget Mahoney. I am the Immediate Past Chair of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network. Thank you for this opportunity to provide opponent testimony on House Bill 14.

HB14 puts a spotlight on Ohio's Family Court System. You are being asked to shine that spotlight on parent's rights, casting a child's best interests into the shadows.

Current law, for very good reasons, establishes a child's best interests as the most important factor in any custody decision. Even under that standard, children are sometimes at high risk in family court. Change *is* needed to ensure a child's needs and mental and physical well-being are not secondary.

My family's experience is a prime example.

The court system can be weaponized and used to continue the power, control, and abuse of a former spouse through their children, especially when parents' rights take priority over a child's.

Our case was in the court system for more than 20 years, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and caused devastating emotional and physical pain and suffering still trying to be healed today.

When I was a TV news anchor, I was married to a successful, but abusive husband. After we divorced, the abuse I endured transferred to our young children. Our full story is attached.

Briefly-

My children were failed by the very system set up to protect them.

Despite being provided years of extensive professional documentation of abuse, the legal system turned a blind eye, ignored the children's pleas for help, and judged the situation as simply two parents who didn't get along.

Instead of protection, the court lengthened the amount of exposure with their father, increasing the layers of emotional and physical trauma and deepening the devastating effects.

My daughter, Julie Boak, was a year old when we separated and was forced into a weaponized court system that lasted her entire childhood. Julie has provided powerful written testimony today of what she endured and its lasting consequences because she was put second.

- Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse
- Photos taken of her some consider child porn.
- Years of speaking to psychologists, guardian ad litem, children's services and others about the abuse, yet taking until the age of 10 to finally receive protection.
- Protection that was limited as he continued stalking through the courts.
- One of the most devastating parts. -With no warning, in the most calculated and cruel way, the sister she adored and looked up to was ripped out of her life. Constant companions and best of friends their time together now restricted to a handful of days a year.

- At 15, needing further protection from the courts, enduring a trial to obtain a 5-year civil protection order, and *another* trial after he violated the order and was found guilty.
- Then the inconceivable. *Even with a protection* order against her father, whose parental time was stopped based on abuse, he was allowed to pursue visitation.
- Suicidal thoughts filled her brain, fearful of a court ordering her to be with her abuser.
- More hearings more trauma lasting almost two years and into her junior year of high school, until a magistrate ruled it would be psychologically damaging to her to spend time with her father.

Doctors liken Julie's childhood to a soldier on the front lines of battle. A warrior, she has struggled with the aftermath. Memories that don't fade. Scars that run deep.

To the outside world, Julie looks like she is thriving, but she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Certain events can trigger agonizing flashbacks and feelings of being in danger.

Physically, she suffers severe problems with sleep, chronic fatigue, and a weakened immune system. She's had Mononucleosis, Lyme Disease, and battled cancer.

As a young adult, Julie has courageously used her experience to help others including providing testimony before the Ohio General Assembly. Her father sued her for defamation. Because Ohio does not have an Anti SLAPP law that protects against frivolous lawsuits, the case dragged on almost two years, cost over a hundred thousand dollars, and added more trauma as she was forced to defensively revisit old wounds and face her abuser in a court system she didn't trust.

HB14 terrifies her. Me too.

Research shows under HB 14, more children will be forced to endure worse than what my daughter did, giving parents like her abusive father more tools, more control, and more power to continue to abuse their children without effective and meaningful recourse by a protective parent, by the child, *or even by the courts* (1,2,3).

In a situation like ours, if I had withheld parenting time when Julie first disclosed her abuse, the court would be required by HB14 to give primary physical custody to her father. Regardless. It puts protective parents in an impossible situation – face criminal charges for *failure to protect*, removal of your child by child welfare for *not* taking protective action, or *lose custody to the abuser* in family court.

It's horrifying to grasp how much worse, how much more destructive it would have been had this been law. Would I have chosen to stay in an abusive marriage to ensure at least some protection for my children? If I left, would Julie have survived?

Please oppose HB14. But please continue to keep a spotlight on Ohio's Family Court There *are* solutions-

The Family Law Reform Implementation is proposed legislation family lawyers and advocates say would address and update problems in the family law statutes. It's the result of the Task Force on Family Law and Children created by the Ohio General Assembly. 4 Comprehensive research resulted in recommendations that will put our children first, ensure families have choices during the divorce process, minimize conflict, and emphasize problem solving.

Ohio's children deserve this, their future depends on it.

1. Under HB 14, the entire cost and burden of litigation will – by design – fall squarely on the shoulders of the parent trying to protect their child. As long as the abusive parent declares that they want 50/50, they have nothing to prove to the court. The person with the most power, and money – usually a domestic violence abuser – controls the solution.
2. Under HB 14, professionals would have to be brought in as experts to prove to the court that a parent’s actions were “detrimental” to their decision making AND to their parenting. I was fortunate to be able to generate the money for this level of help and expertise, but most parents I speak with who are trying to protect their children cannot afford this.
3. The premise of HB 14- that forcing 50/50 time will force parents to get along. What happened instead to my family (what will happen even more if this bill is passed) is that the abuser will have greater access to and control over his victims – the non-abusive parent and the children.
4. Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children Family Law Reform: Minimizing Conflict, Maximizing Families https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/docs/JCS/taskforce/report_final.pdf

For Context of our case

**Ohio CASA/GAL Association
Celebrate Kids Conference 2018!
Plenary Speaker Bridget Mahoney
September 27, 2018**

Good morning. It is such a pleasure to be here today at Celebrate Kids Conference 2018!

I want to extend my deep appreciation to Ohio CASA for asking me to speak and for all the hard work that goes into organizing this so very special event. Thank you to all the amazing workshop leaders...your work is so outstanding, so vital, so needed. Thank you for all that you do. And for your continuing commitment to make things better.

It is so good to see all of you participants here today...ready to listen, ready to learn, ready to make a difference as you join the front lines in advocating for the best interest of children.

It takes courage and strength for every step of the way – in becoming aware of what is happening to abused and neglected children courage and strength to start to take action. I applaud all of you.

It wasn't in the plan I had for my life to be talking about these issues... until I got a first-hand experience.

When I was in high school, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I went to Ohio State, got my degree in journalism, went back to my hometown in Northeast Ohio -Youngstown. I began my career in radio, eventually jumping over into television and worked my way up the ladder to become the first female anchor of the city's number one 6 and 11 o'clock news.

As far as my personal life, I met and married a local businessman and we had two daughters. In public he was very outgoing, charming, very philanthropic, which makes it hard for those in the outside world to believe the darkness he was capable of.

But, at home and behind closed doors, it didn't take long for the abuse to start. Like a lot of victims, I thought I could fix whatever was wrong with more love... if I only tried harder. Counseling didn't work. He was typical of an abuser- from his standpoint, I was the problem.

As you all know it's all about power and control over an intimate partner.

There seems to be a manual that's followed-

- Control the finances...check
- Erode self esteem
- Isolate from family and friends
- And throw in fear and intimidation

I thought I could handle what was happening to me, I really wanted to keep my nuclear family intact. That all changed when I saw the abuse start happening to our children.

What I tell you today is only the tip of the iceberg in a story that spans nearly three decades. The journey began in 1989 when I filed for divorce— my children were 4 and one.

I thought leaving him would make it better. But how dare I walk away.

It escalated the abuse-some my daughters witnessed. I was choked, tackled, pinned to the floor, and shoved down a flight of steps with my head snapping against the floor as I landed. Even after he moved out, I would wake, terrified to see him standing and staring at me from the foot of the bed, pursuing the marital rights he thought he still had. I began sleeping with a knife under my pillow.

I was granted a restraining order. But it didn't really make me feel safe.

He eerily reminded me how cheap it was to get someone murdered in Youngstown, once called a working-class mob town. As someone who worked in the news, I knew the truth to that.

And even though I appeared with a cast on my arm while I was anchoring the news, no one knew what was really going on in my private life. I was silent. We all were. Domestic violence was deep in the shadows.

On the day we got divorced my ex vowed to ruin me financially, ruin my career, and ruin my reputation. He weaponized the courts to do so.

Financially, the costs have been astronomical.

After a while with all the stress and strain, I left what had become a successful and promising career. My reputation? I have been the target of outlandish accusations and deeds.

It all makes for an inconceivable story what happened to me, but the most important point I need to get across is this-

As an adult, I had a right to leave our abusive marriage. Our children were denied those rights.

And what the system needs to learn is that when an abuser can no longer directly get to his spouse, he will get to her by battering their children. The abuse that I endured, was transferred to my children and they suffered every form of abuse. Every form.

And so, I did what came naturally to me... I tried to protect them.

I began by enlisting the help of a psychologist starting when Mara was 4 and half... alarmed that she was hitting herself and digging her nails into her skin. The psychologist reported to both parents that Mara felt responsible for her parents' feelings. Her father used that knowledge to control and manipulate her throughout her childhood.

I attended sessions with the psychologist with my ex in the hopes of reaching him, but those sessions and the court ordered sessions with a family mediator only proved to be more opportunities for my ex to berate and blame me...and no one stopped him.

I had a high conflict ex-spouse, and despite years of extensive professional documentation of abuse, the legal system turned a blind eye and ignored the children's pleas for help. Instead of looking for and listening to the facts, it was continually judged by the courts, that what was presented was simply two parents who didn't get along- maintaining and fueling the belief they chose, that this was simply, annoyingly, a he said she said situation.

My children were failed by the very system set up to protect them. Instead, the court lengthened the amount of exposure the girls had with their father increasing the layers of emotional and physical trauma, and deepening the devastating effects still trying to be healed today.

The hard parts along the way

- not being believed
- feelings of helplessness and shame
- feeling judged isolated and so very, very alone
- it was hard to know who I could trust
- it was hard to be told to "just get over it" to be nicer, more submissive. To not take him to court over child support because you don't want to look aggressive.
- it was hard watching my financial debt grow because of his countless legal actions. Hard to know I was helpless in stopping them.
- it was hard working to overcome the emotional and physical health issues tied to all the trauma.

It was hard to realize he faced little or no consequences for his actions

- violating court orders,
- -assaulting me, --admitting the assault in court and still being acquitted,
- attempting to intimidate my lawyers,
- and above all, abusing our children
- and to know that my oldest daughter, worn down by the abuse, at one point gave in/surrendered to the belief of the lies that were told to her by her father.

Which resulted in the hardest part of all the one that is still as grievous as the day it happened and still cuts me to the core. It was the day we were set to go to court to present the years of documentation of abuse. In the opinion of attorneys, and professionals, the case was strong.

It was 1997 ...Mara is 12 Julie is 9. I had dropped them off for their summer visitation a few weeks earlier.

From the time she was 4 years old... Mara was so courageous, she had spoken up for herself and her little sister. She appealed to her father to stop – but that made it worse, and she was punished for speaking up.

Before visits she would sob uncontrollably, after visits she would vomit violently. She would run after my car screaming as I pulled out of her father's driveway on drop offs. She witnessed me being physically abused...and saw no consequences for him. She told her therapist, teachers, the family mediator, the guardian ad litem ...what he was doing and about what her father was telling her:

- That she was to blame for the divorce.
- that her mother hired a hitman to kill him.
- that she lived too far away from him and she would die if she was ever in an accident ...because they had the same blood and he wouldn't be there in time to give her his blood.

And he warned her to stay silent -if she told the judge what he was doing, he would go to jail and lose his business.

She is pressured, living in fear and filled with guilt, she is betrayed by her guardian ad litem. She doesn't believe the court will protect her.

She surrenders to the stress, confusion, and control surrounding her life. in her child's eyes there is no way out, she is coerced into agreeing to live with her father. For survival she begins to bury her memories...and forget

The Stockholm syndrome- a form of bonding with an abuser. A victim's subconscious strategy for survival.

When their father brought the girls to court that day... my youngest daughter, Julie had no idea what was going to transpire. Julie skipped into the courthouse and met me with a hopeful smile... she thought finally the day had come where those with the power to protect her would finally listen. But what she heard instead was she and her sister would be parted. Both girls were crying. My sister collected an inconsolable, trembling, Julie in her arms and carried her limp little body out of the courthouse...her hand reaching for her sister who was walking away with their abuser.

Julie's spirit died that day. For a year and a half, she blames herself, thinking she had done something to make Mara go away. Two sisters who had been comrades, friends, and a support system for each other, now for all intents and purposes ripped from each other's lives- seeing each other just a few days out of an entire year.

While Mara and I enjoy a good relationship now it was not always the case-there were many painful periods of time with long silences. And the same tactic of isolation used with me during the

marriage was used with Mara. Contact between Mara and me, her sister, my family or former friends was difficult to impossible. Once her father had custody of Mara, therapy was for the most part was halted.

A few years ago, I learned heartbreaking news.

Several months after Mara's father became her custodial parent, I continued motions to stop visitations for Julie. A visiting judge, presiding over that fateful day was still on the case. He had spoken to Mara privately at that hearing, but the judge was never given the documents to read. With these new motions, he finally had a chance and based on the documented abuse the visiting judge suspended visits between Julie and her father.

Those same documents that would also have protected Mara. It wasn't until years later I found out that shortly after Julie received this protection, Mara tried to call that judge who was so kind and caring of her that day. Her father and his lawyer became aware of that call. Quickly and surreptitiously, the only judge to help my children, was removed from our case. It is my belief the judge never found out Mara was trying to reach him.

Once Mara is living with her father, he takes aim at Julie. The person who should have loved her most in this world...declares war against his daughter and once again weaponizes a complicit court system.

Constant, extensive, and exhaustive legal court preparations took over our lives. It was overwhelming, debilitating, and traumatic.

The barrage of legal actions piled on debt, college savings were wiped out, loans were taken against the house to pay lawyers. but the physical and emotional tolls were worse. Julie's doctors described her childhood as being a soldier consistently on the front lines of battle for 18 years. Her frontline was a court system used as a combat zone.

For solid devastating reasons, I did not think Julie would make it out of her childhood alive.

The following is an excerpt from a national speech Julie gave-

Over the years I was forced by the courts in my father's hometown to visit him, no matter how much I spoke up that he was hurting me in every way possible. I faced a legal system that seemed to value a parent's right to torture offspring over a child's right to grow up unscarred.

I could not understand why a genetic relationship gave him a right to do things that if it had been any one else (like a soccer coach) would have put that person behind bars. Maybe the courts didn't want to believe that because of who he was, a prominent businessman, a rotary club president, that he could possibly be doing the things I was saying.

But the reality is

Along with emotionally and physically hurting me, my father sexually abused me when I was 5, or at least that's the first time I remember. That's not something one really ever gets over, no matter how many times you say it out loud. And this is the hardest thing for me to say Nothing, nothing, ever

feels normal and natural again for a child who has been molested... the age of innocence ceases to exist.

Looking back, he began to groom me when I was a toddler...putting me in beauty pageants I didn't want to be in, dressing me up and taking pictures that many would consider child pornography.

It took until I was ten years old for a trusted new attorney and a visiting judge with no ties to Youngstown to finally listen to me and stop the visits.

But stopping the visits didn't stop the abuse. For the next 8 years he not only physically stalked me he also stalked me through the courts and the courts allowed him. He had the right to use the legal system to harass me, cause me devastating emotional pain and drain our family financially... all under the guise of trying to resume visitation, which he really didn't want anyway.

This meant more court proceedings, more testimony, hiring and spending more on lawyers and all the while... a threat of having to be with him hanging over my head. I didn't have mental peace of mind and I didn't have physical peace, there was always the fear of him showing up out the blue. And I certainly didn't trust the people who would decide my fate.

All through my high school years when I should have had fun playing on my soccer team, enjoying homecoming and prom and all the other great things you get to do in high school - I was in and out of court.

But now it wasn't just Youngstown, it was Butler County too, and sometimes there were two trials going on at once...one where I currently lived with my mother and the other five hours away where my father lived. On top of everything else that was going on I had to get a restraining order against him when I was 15yrs old. He fought it, we had a lengthy trial and as soon as the trial was over, he violated the restraining order... and we were back in court for another trial where he was found guilty.

Meanwhile in Youngstown, unbelievably, and with the domestic relations court judge knowing that a five-year restraining order was in effect and that he was found guilty of violating it, he was STILL allowed to pursue visitation.

I was a freshman. It was a living nightmare. I was terrified the courts would force me to visit my abuser. I had a new guardian ad litem in Youngstown and had to start all over in telling he did to me... yet another in the countless number of people I kept having to tell my story to over the years.

It seemed like the guardian understood and would speak on my behalf. I also spoke with the magistrate privately and I was told later that he was very moved by our conversation. It took a year and a half to go through all the hearings and before a decision was reached. I was now going into my junior year in high school.

The judge ruled it would be harmful to me to visit him. Incredibly, the guardian ad litem said my father had "made some mistakes" and should be given another chance.

During the course of that year and a half, I had to go on anti-depressants. I felt like I was in the fight of my life, but I wasn't sure I wanted to live anymore. One day instead of cutting my wrist, I closed the knife drawer and grabbed a pair of scissors and butchered my hair instead.

I wanted to escape, to be someone else. I had been in therapy to heal my wounds from the past and move forward with my life, but when he filed to reestablish visits, the past was dredged up, and I felt like I was on trial, I didn't trust the legal system to protect me, and each passing month added more and more layers of agonizing hurt that I am still faced with overcoming.

My scars run deep.

Healing -Advocacy

Since giving that speech while she was in college, Julie has worked very hard on healing her emotional scars. We both have come a long way and Neither one of us wants to be controlled by our past.

Today, Julie is one of the strongest and most emotionally healthy people I know...she is thriving.

But childhood trauma also takes a devastating toll on the physical health of a person.

Studies show the long-term activation of our body's fight or flight stress response weakens the immune system and the ability to fight illness and disease.

That has been the case for Julie...she has suffered chronic upper respiratory infections, mononucleosis, Lyme disease, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe sleep disorder, chronic fatigue, she has battled through anxiety and depression...and cancer.

Part of our healing process has been to advocate for change, education, awareness, and prevention of domestic violence and child abuse. We have done it through writing, speaking, and policy work.

In 2008, while in college, Julie courageously began sharing her story in public, 10 years before the #MeToo movement was formed. At the same time, I began working with Jim and Elsa Croucher of Citizens Against Domestic Violence in presenting teen dating violence education to tens of thousands of Ohio High School students. The Croucher's were compelled to create their program after their daughter, Tina, had been murdered by an abusive ex-boyfriend.

In 2009, Motivated by making sure every teen had access to the knowledge of dating abuse, the Crouchers and I spearheaded the successful effort to pass the Tina Croucher Act mandating Dating Violence education in all Ohio Schools. The legislation had passed the House in a few short months, Jim, Elsa, and I testified along with others in support of the bill. But when it got to the Senate Education committee it stalled and we began getting some strong pushback. When we finally got a hearing before the committee, we pulled out all the stops including adding Julie to the lineup of those testifying in favor of the bill. She told of what she saw going on in the lives of her teenage friends, the devastating abuse. She shared part of her past so that the senators knew how destructive abuse in any form can be. She knocked it out of the ballpark. The bill passed out of committee and

was unanimously passed in the Senate, and later signed into law by then Gov. Ted Strickland. The signing ceremony was cathartic for the Croucher family. For Julie and me, it felt like a turning point.... We were helping make a difference.

By 2011 I began to tell my personal story. At the same time, my ex-husband began sending intimidating cease and desist letters. On the advice of a lawyer, I ignored them. In 2012 Harassing phone calls were made to Elsa Croucher by my ex-husband threatening that she needed to let me go from their program because I wasn't telling the truth.

We powered through the intimidation and continued our work. In 2014 another cease and desist letter this time to the Crouchers threatening legal action if Julie's Senate testimony for Tina's Law wasn't removed from the CADV website.

Again, we choose not to be silenced.

Defamation Lawsuit

In 2015, my ex-husband, Sam Boak, along with his multi-million-dollar company, Boak and Sons Inc., filed a defamation lawsuit against me, Citizens Against Domestic violence, and his own daughter, Julie Boak. The suit also claimed interference with his business, intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress. I was sued for the speech I give, Julie was sued for the testimony she gave before the Ohio Senate on behalf of the Tina Croucher Act.

It felt like we were at ground zero, once again controlled, traumatized, and powerless. It was a nightmare that lasted nearly two years. A nightmare I haven't fully recovered from ...and am well aware could be repeated every time I speak.

Preparing for the defamation suit was grueling. I was forced to endure an arduous and emotionally agonizing discovery process. Going through dozens of boxes of documents I had kept over the years. Re-reading the hundreds of documents -police reports, therapist reports, transcripts from trials, catapulting me into the horror of how my children suffered. I relived every moment of hell as if it were happening in the present-all the terrifying, helpless, and hopeless feelings. And it wasn't just for a day or a week or two... it took months to go through it all.

I was grateful to still have all those documents from the past.... If not, I would have been very defenseless and surely silenced.

I had to be fully prepared for the trial scheduled before a judge and a jury. Once again, I would be back in the court system of Youngstown. A city where he is seen as a community leader, successful businessman, and a generous philanthropist who has been honored with numerous awards. The thoughts of not being listened to, not being believed came back to haunt me.

The deposition before his three lawyers was intense -lasting 5 or 6 hours with questions about decades of experiences that I had to explain in minute detail to people whose mission it was to defend an abuser and put it back to the well tested, very reliable he said she said status.

Questions like, "Precisely and with great detail Ms. Mahoney please describe as a little girl how Julie first told you that her father was touching her private parts."

The scorching pain from that memory, compounded by his lawyers mocking me “why would you let her go on visits if you knew she was being molested?”

I felt vilified and revictimized throughout the entire lawsuit. I felt raw and exposed when legally he gained access to the reports from my private therapy sessions- learning the intimate details of my life that had nothing to do with him as he sat listening to my therapist’s deposition.

As far as Julie...She had been trying to forge a normal life for herself. She graduated from the Ohio State University, worked diligently to overcome the trauma, and was establishing a career.

When the lawsuit was filed, she was devastated knowing that once again she had to face her abuser in a court system, she had no faith in. Old anxieties whipped back into her life. Her sleep was destroyed. The lingering fear that at any moment she would be tapped on the shoulder by a process server and the constant anticipation of having to relive all the nightmares of her past became overwhelming.

She traversed the country, moving from New York to California, back to Cincinnati where I live, then back to New York. She secured then left jobs. It was like she was trying to escape from those old feelings, those old memories she had worked so hard to make peace with. But there was no peace, there was no escape.

The lawsuit created never-ending thoughts in her head of the times he molested her. Her mind was flooded with flashbacks -a paralyzing constant loop of memories. She began to question how many other times had he done this to her? Were there times she had buried so deep just to survive?

She wanted it all to end. Once again, she had no control over her life. She looked to me, as her mother for help, for protection. But again, there was nothing I could do to stop her father from once again using the courts as a battleground against us. I will tell you, no mother should ever have to stand by powerless and witness their child suffer as Julie did during all the lawsuits.

And yet here we both were again.

On one of the trips out to visit with Julie, it was almost time for me to fly back home. She entered her living room where I was and looked at me with desperate eyes. those unbearable looping thoughts had taken hold of her again....She had her arms clutched around her as if to restrain herself...as told me she felt urges of jumping off the balcony of her 16th-floor apartment. The only way she thought she could silence her mind.

As far as the case, the suit against the organization I worked for was dismissed after a few months. The attorney who filed his lawsuit asked and was granted removal from the case. He dropped his company from the action because he refused to turn over tax returns proving loss of business. All that was left was his claim we were causing him emotional distress for speaking publicly about how he abused us.

On the day the trial began almost two years after the case was filed, I was drained physically, emotionally, and financially. I was prepared to go the distance, but after spending over \$100 thousand dollars in legal fees already and facing tens of thousands more during the course of a trial...I had run out of money to defend my truth against this meritless lawsuit. And so, when a deal

was offered, I was forced to bargain away some of my freedom of speech. I agreed to parameters of where I can speak- outside a radius of where he lives and works. I have been partially silenced.

I was and am still shattered by that. I am still recovering emotionally, I have yet to recover financially, and for a long time during and after the lawsuit, I nearly stopped my advocacy work.

Ohio Citizen Participation Act- Anti-SLAPP

As it stands in Ohio anyone who comes forward to tell their story or report a sexual crime to gain protection and justice are vulnerable to the same debilitating frivolous defamation lawsuits that we endured. By the very nature of the threat that exists, we do not know how many have already been completely silenced.

For that reason, Julie and I joined a Coalition that is working to change that. I'm happy to report that Senate Bill 206 - the Ohio Public Participation Act was introduced last fall and Julie and I both provided testimony in support of the legislation this past summer.

Currently, 28 states have Anti-SLAPP laws that provide quicker remedies to frivolous lawsuits that aim at chilling First Amendment Rights. If the law existed in Ohio, our lawsuit would likely have only lasted a few short months and been over long before the entire discovery and deposition process was complete.

The law will not take away my ex -husband's right to sue me or Julie again. That right is guaranteed. What it will do is give us and others like us a tool for protection so that we are safe to exercise our freedom of speech.

My ex's efforts to silence us have backfired. Our stories through the Anti-SLAPP testimony are on the internet. We will continue to speak publicly, but now with the added cost of an umbrella insurance policy which covers fees for libel. I continue to be wary about what he will attempt next to silence us.

I continue to be grateful for the platforms I have been given to help make a difference including serving on the board of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network. Among our organization's efforts - working to finally get a line item in Ohio's budget dedicated to the prevention and education of domestic violence. Ohio is one of the few states without one. Neighboring Pennsylvania dedicates \$15 million dollars. So please start spreading the word – DV Line Item State Budget!

Thank you again... to everyone in this room, for all you have done, for all you are doing, and for all you will be doing to protect children from abuse and neglect. You are my heroes.