

Sonia Ferencik, LISW-S

House Families and Aging Committee

Opponent Testimony on H.B. 14

May 11, 2024

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Families and Aging Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written opponent testimony on HB14. My name is Sonia Ferencik and I live in Bay Village, Ohio. I am a lifelong Ohio citizen, a graduate of The Ohio State University and CASE Western Reserve University. I am a LISW-S, a professional social worker with an independent status. I began working in the field of domestic violence in 1986 and have remained committed to serving young people for over 35 years working in domestic violence shelters and our communities in northeast Ohio. Working in domestic violence shelters empowers me to know that the tactics of an abusive partner of harm and manipulation place children in danger. It is by building rapport and trust with both adult and child victims of domestic violence that I can bear witness, and provide written testimony, stressing the need for their safety to be considered in HB 14.

My roles included serving as an advocate with families residing in domestic violence shelters and facilitating youth and family trauma intervention support groups for families victimized. Additionally, I worked as a co-facilitator of batterer's treatment groups and answered thousands of hot line calls from victims of intimate partner violence when they sought safety, shelter, and other resources for themselves and their children.

Children and teens will not be safe in a 50/50 parenting split. We know this to be a fact because of the prevalence of domestic violence in Ohio, across this country, and throughout the world. It is my sincere hope that you will take into account the emotional and physical well-being of children and teens who are exposed to a parent who is abusive within an intimate relationship. Children and teens described how fearful they were, and how challenging it was to focus in school when they knew they and their brothers and sisters had to go on mandatory visits. They experienced headaches, stomachaches, and separation anxieties from their protective parent who was victimized in the relationship.

Children and teens shared with me that they had to "take care" of each other during visitations. They were questioned about what the other parent was doing, they had to navigate worry, manage fearful moments, and comply when afraid consequently, struggling with their safety and divided loyalties. Sometimes, their educational needs were undermined by the partner/parent who was abusive, they were forbidden to talk with their protective parent while visiting, and meaningful items were "taken from them" which resulted in the children feeling alone and not

sure of how to trust. Visitation becomes a tool and tactic by the abusive partner but for the children and teens, it is their “lived” experience affecting them deeply, disrupting their feelings of safety, consistency, and love.

Research into domestic violence asserts that the abusive partner uses children to continue the abuse and harm when the victimized partner leaves the unhealthy relationship. **Thereby placing children amid emotional and physical harm: Ohio’s children need you, the committee members, to be their voice of protection.**

Not all adults who are parents are safe ones who teach their children about justice, fairness, and responsibilities. Partners who batter are not **cooperative parents** but rather use children as part of the abuse, placing them in the middle to experience ongoing loss and traumas while experiencing the twisting of love and abuse.

If we want young people to grow into healthy productive citizens, they need safety and protection in childhood. Please, this is a major decision in your hands, A decision that can foreshadow children’s future; a future where their safety is protected or a future where the rights of harmful adults/parents are the only factors taken into account. ACES, Adverse Childhood Experiences study offers vital insight and research about the long-term consequences of children’s adverse experiences. ACES shows that exposure to abuse (domestic violence) can lead to lifelong physical and mental health outcomes. Please, I ask of you in your service to stand for protecting Ohio’s youngest and **vote no on HB 14.**

Respectfully,

Sonia Ferencik