

**House Families and Aging Committee
Submitted Opponent Testimony for House Bill 14
May 13, 2024**

Megan Gergen, MPA
Manager of Public Affairs and Communications

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, and members of the House Families and Aging Committee thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to House Bill 14.

Journey Center for Safety and Healing has been a catalyst for change in issues concerning domestic violence and child abuse in Cuyahoga County for nearly fifty years. Our mission is to provide services that encourage safety and healing for those affected by child abuse and domestic violence and to prevent abuse through education, advocacy, and systemic change.

Journey Center is the most comprehensive domestic violence agency in Northeast Ohio providing services (helpline, shelter/housing, justice system/court advocacy, prevention/education, therapy, case management, visitation) for more than 12,000 individuals each year. Journey is unique in combining domestic violence and child abuse in its mission. Combining these two issues allows our organization to recognize and address violence at all levels of a family unit, supporting those who have been directly harmed by abuse in the home and those who have been harmed by the abuse that they have witnessed.

Journey Center is also opposed to any proposal that creates a “presumption of equal parenting” which puts the rights of parents over the best interests of a child. This bill hurts domestic violence survivors and especially their children, placing insurmountable burdens for victims of domestic violence and child abuse.

Ohio's children deserve safety-focused legislation. One such legislation would be the bipartisan "Keeping Children Safe from Family Violence Act." As Congress has now recognized, many U.S. children – estimates are in the tens of thousands - have been put at risk and even killed by a dangerous parent, many after a family court rejected abuse evidence and safety concerns voiced by a protective parent. Furthermore, it is well-documented that abusive parents frequently use family courts as a means of continuing their abuse post-separation to hurt and control their former partners by taking away or harming the children. The Keeping Children Safe from Family Violence Act provides federal funds to the states that improve their child custody laws to better protect at-risk children.

Journey Center for Safety and Healing has witnessed this harm firsthand. We have seen abusive parents take their victims and children to court repeatedly, hoping that the victim will no longer be able to pay court or attorney fees and use the time before, during, or after court to further harass or cause harm to their victim. Journey Center advocates have witnessed parents who have used their shared parenting time to neglect their children to further harm their victim through medical, emotional, and physical abuse. Some studies show the risk factors for lethality for children are the same as risk factors for

SUPPORTING THOSE IMPACTED BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE

Helpline: 216.391.4357 (HELP) • p: 216.229.2420 • f: 216.229.2474
Journeyneo.org • P.O. Box 5466, Cleveland, OH 44101

parents- when an adult is in danger, children are equally in danger. Safety of the non-offending parent means safety for the children.

Please do not support the latest version of HB 14. Instead, look at proven solutions that address the dangers of domestic violence for the survivors and their children navigating the family court system.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit our comments in opposition to this proposal.