

Good Afternoon. Thank you for granting me this opportunity to speak today. I am so grateful that Michigan's legislature and citizens hold so dearly the well being of the children of our great state. Michigan's willingness and desire to encourage and enact change to benefit and enhance children's lives and provide the best opportunities for our children is commendable. I am proud to be a lifelong citizen of a state that places our children foremost in importance. I am not here to speak on behalf of lawyers or judges or friend of the court, or any of the other entities involved in the business of child custody. I am here to speak on behalf of Michigan's children and in support of this shared parenting bill. All Children, those living in intact parental homes as well as those living in divorced or separated parental homes need and deserve to retain the guidance and love from both of their parents, and also from their complete extended families. Our children need your help to obtain this.

My name is Linda Wright and I am a Mother, and a Grandmother. I am currently a Licensed Dental Hygienist. I was previously a licensed Family Child care provider for 8 years. I currently am working with the National Parent's Organization to establish a Michigan chapter to continue to advocate for our children. I have raised two children by myself since my husband died in 1998. Although my children's experience of growing up without a father is different than that experienced by children from divorced or separated parents, they still have experienced the devastating loss of their fathers' love, guidance and companionship so important to and desired by them. Although I did my best to provide my son and daughter with good strong male role-models, their loss from not having their father in their lives remains evident today into their adulthood. No one can replace your own Mother or Father. The natural design of children having two parents is not flawed and needs to be protected.

While We can't protect our children from the loss of a parent resulting from death, we certainly have the ability and the responsibility to do everything possible to prevent the loss of a parent that frequently occurs through separation. Loss that is being ordered and supported in our court rooms when one parent is named as a non- custodial parent. The children are the innocent victims here. I know that We all hold dearly our duty and our obligation to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Some say it takes a village to raise a child. Others remain with the belief that the responsibility inherently and rightfully belongs with the parents and is hopefully enhanced with the support of their extended families. However, as is being currently demonstrated in many custody decisions all it takes to eliminate this is for one parent to disagree. This one parent's disagreement then frequently enables the child to essentially lose both, their other parent, as well as their village.

Until the birth of my first and only Grandchild, I too was ignorant of the devastating and overwhelming emotional and financial realities that occur when met with one parent's insistence that they intend to do everything in their power to eliminate the other parent as well as the entire paternal family...Simply because Mother and Father separated. In my experience, in every aspect of this parents mission they have had great power and has easily exerted this power because of the desire to have and has been given sole physical custody. In retaliation for my son filing for Joint custody This parent has systematically made her way through a popular checklist of false allegations and ploys commonly used to ensure sole custody. Unfortunately it frequently and very easily works. The current courtroom orders especially the lack of consequences from this behavior are encouraging and enabling this to continue. The current custody act, written in 1970, is outdated and falls far from being relevant to the changes in the dynamics of today's society. Our current system encourages constant litigation which is very profitable for the family law attorneys and very harmful to our children and families.

This is 3 years of a father fighting to be a father to his daughter.

This is my retirement

This book cost me, my son and his daughter \$30,000.

With the current system when one parent refuses to share the parenting of their children with the other parent for any number of reasons or perceptions the other parent is then forced to ask the courts to to intervene. The power and duty to enable and encourage more than a limited amount of access and influence of the child's entire family lies solely in the Judge's hands. With a rebuttable

presumption of equal parenting being the starting point, thus initially presuming at the start that children deserve equal access to both parents, and that both parents are equally deserving of parenting their child, the preservation of the child's parental relationships is allowed to occur. Judicial discretion may then be applied, if clear and convincing evidence shows that this is not in the best interest of the child.

I would like to address a statement previously made before this committee regarding how Judges only decide custody in 1% of cases and that the other 99% come to their own agreement. Settling is not synonymous with agreeing and doesn't mean it is the right choice. In many cases it is the least risky choice available. Kind of like a plea bargain. One prevalent reason many parents end up settling their case is because they simply have no more money to continue paying the attorney and court costs. Many never have the money to begin and must just accept what is presented. I have exhausted my retirement fund that I have worked 41 years to save. I am confident there will be more needed. We simply do not have any more. A much greater cost paid was with time, time that can never be regained.

Secondly, when one is told by their attorney that the Judge said, "I am not going to give him 50/50" and "I am not going to award make up time for all the denied parenting time, there is just too much, we will just move on from here". And also told, "I am not interested in hearing all about the 27 allegations made which you state you have evidence to prove false" When you are told this by your lawyer as you are awaiting the beginning of the hearing, and it has been 3 years and already cost many tens of thousands of dollars..... and... you are urged to just settle, most often, faced with uncertainty and fear you settle. That doesn't mean you agreed, it means you had to settle. Most recently in our case, what my son settled upon was not even what was then put on the record by his attorney. His attorney spoke incorrectly and Consequently, now he has stipulated to something he did not agree too, with no recourse.

Recent Census Bureau child custody statistics indicate that nearly 40 percent of all noncustodial fathers have no access to or visitation rights with their children. Children, if given the choice, would not choose to have only one of their parents. They love and need them both.

When both parents are fit, able and willing to parent their children both parents should retain the opportunity to do just that. However, with the current Custody Act The courts are designating one parent to a group called Non-Custodial Parent and then limiting their fundamental and constitutional rights to parent their child because they are in that group. The courts are creating a class of citizens who are then being discriminated against.

The objection frequently stated to shared parenting is the presence of domestic violence, and abuse. While these specific behaviors are abhorrent and do happen, they are far less ubiquitous than are being so broadly stated. It is my observation that these behaviors are being presented and insinuated as being entirely pertaining to the father, all fathers. It appears there is a blanket assumption being presented that all fathers especially divorced or separated fathers are abusers. In reality, we know that isn't accurate. That is a skewed perception. These critical factors are certainly not absent from some mothers but that fact is not being showcased. Both supporting as well as opposing sides have ample room to present anecdotal examples of negative, and extreme instances of both fathers and mothers. Domestic violence is not gender specific. Victims of domestic violence are found in both males and females, perpetrators of domestic violence are both male and female. This shared parenting bill supports judicial discretion when evidence is provided of domestic violence or abuse by either the Mother or the Father. The desire to be a parent to your own child, following a divorce or ending of a relationship is not a crime. It does not make you a criminal and one should not be treated as a criminal in their quest to remain a parent. The very notion that you have to fight for that right simply because the parents have separated is peculiar and disturbing. Criminals are entitled to a presumption of innocence. Murderers, thieves, even Sexual deviants are all entitled to the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Proven with evidence, not hearsay. Parents in family court are devoid of this right. To oppose shared parenting on the premise that there is domestic violence in the world, to advocate for the presumption that one is a domestic violator and argue that no evidence need be required is inconceivable.

Some question the motives of the noncustodial parent seeking equal shared parenting of their children. Some say they just want to avoid paying child support while conversely said is that those opposing do so only because they want to keep

the child support money. Our children are not for sale. No parent should lose the ability to parent their child in a substantial way because they make more money and can therefore better subsidize the other parent's finances. Shared parenting of children should not be opposed on the basis that the now sole custodial parent may receive less child support. Child support is to provide for the child. It is not alimony to support the other parent. Our children are not for sale, they are not pawns to be used in a game with one parent becoming the "winner" while the other a "loser" The children lose too. This bill seeking a rebuttable presumption of substantially equal shared parenting, does not contain efforts to eliminate child support.

According to the Census Bureau, parents who owe child support are more likely to pay the ordered child support if they either share custody of or have significant parenting rights with their children. I have spoken with many fathers who state that they would gladly continue to pay child support if they could just have more time with their children. The desire to eliminate paying child support is not the motive for most in their endeavor for equal parenting. I certainly hope that the desire to continue receiving income from one parent is not the basis for denying the children equal access to both parents.

Frequently we hear "Fathers need to step up to the plate and be fathers to their children" Many, many fathers would love to do just that. In reality, fathers are met with incredible obstacles from many different avenues including the other parent as well as the courts thwarting their efforts to do just that. To Be a father...not a visitor...and not just a paycheck. The scale of justice is heavily tipped. On one side we criticize and hold fathers accountable for not being fathers to their children calling them deadbeats, while on the other we inhibit and remove their ability to do so by ordering severely limited authority and access to their children.

Our Childrens' right to both parents is consistently being stripped away from them based on the bias and presumption that Mother and father are not equal in their ability and in their inherent natural right to parent their children. How about we start with the presumption both parents are good parents , until it is proven otherwise. That is entirely logical. Sole custody of children should be the last resort not the standard. In addition to happier, healthier children. There are

many benefits to those who are now sole custodial mothers, or single mothers. Shared parenting is equally advantageous to women and mothers equality providing them time to pursue higher education and pursue advances in their careers and closing the pay gap. The sharing of the duties and responsibilities of the children also gives women time to explore personal interests and hobbies. It would allow women to have more rest and relaxation and relief from the stress of full time child rearing thus rejuvenating their energy and emotional reserve.

Michigan's children are suffering. There is a crisis occurring. We have increased truancy, child and adolescence crime, substance addiction issues, heroin addiction, people overdosing and dying in McDonalds bathrooms, in cars as they drive down the road. We have increased suicides and suicidal thoughts in children. We have a mental health crisis with children. Currently, Network 180 in Kent County is implementing a mobile crisis team to diffuse the situation of overcrowding in hospitals and mental health facilities for children. One single mother in an article published last week on Wood tv News 8 in Grand rapids stated that her suicidal 12- year old remained in Helen DeVos Children's hospital for more than a week because he can't get a bed at a mental health facility. She stated "They just said there's no beds anywhere in the state. It could be up to two, three weeks before any type of placement is available for these kids". We are now seeing the second and third generation of children who are growing up without the benefit of a substantial relationship and guidance and discipline from both parents. The emotional toll of the change in family dynamics is certainly related to the increase in emotional difficulties. Taking one parent out of their proper role and instituting them as a mere visitor isn't working for our children. It is quite evident that it is harming them. Michigan's lawmakers must make changes that allow and enable fathers as well as mothers to remain instrumental in raising their children to be healthy, self-sufficient, and mentally and emotionally secure adults.

I am excited and optimistic in the progress seen so far in the continuation of this initiative. There is great hope for Michigan's children. The benefits of Shared parenting is in the forefront of many nations across the world. Countries across the globe are recognizing the significance of improving the lives of children. Children and families are the fabric of our society, the future of our world.

HB 4691 is about the shared parenting of children. It is not a bill about what is in the best interest of lawyers or what is in the best interest of Judges, or really what is in the best interest of the parents. It is not about money. It is, about what is in the best interest of the children.

In conclusion, I would like to share some words from Robert Franklin of the National Parents Organization regarding Last weeks International Conference on Shared Parenting that was held in Boston. People came from over 24 Countries, some from as far away as Australia, Sweden and Japan. The scientists at the conference included such luminaries as Sanford Brauer, Richard Warshak, Linda Nielsen, Irwin Sandler, Michael Lamb and William Fabricus. The consensus agreed upon was that the science on Shared parenting is now sufficiently well established for us to say that shared parenting should be the default position in family courts. Solid Science unequivocally supports that there is no longer any doubt about the benefits of shared parenting to children, parents and judicial process that is significant enough to delay making shared parenting public policy everywhere. There is no doubt about its superiority to sole parenting.

Your attention and high regard towards the importance of the current research studies and evidence based facts which overwhelmingly support that shared parenting is what is best for children lends great respect and confidence in our states lawmakers. I ask that you vote yes on this bill and make each child able to retain equal access to both of their parents and families. Thank you again for your consideration and attention to this very important aspect of our children and grand childrens' lives. Michigan looks forward to the betterment for children. Shared parenting is Michigan's future. Let's get there sooner than later.

Thank you so much for your time.