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On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Judiciary
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB710

I am a member of the VOICES Survivor Advisory Committee with the Family Justice Center of Washington County. I am intelligent, empathetic, and a great mom. I'm also a survivor of nearly 25 years of psychological, emotional, and financial abuse. I know many other women, and men, who have been coercively beaten to the point of paralysis by the person claiming to "love" them. I was on the verge of suicide and trying to protect my kids from the abuse of their father when I finally found the courage to file for divorce. I felt helpless and scared. Every time I tried to reach out for help, I was told I had no recourse. From the police, DHS, Washington County Circuit Court, Conciliation Services, I was never assigned or directed to a single resource. I could not afford an attorney. So, I counted on the judge in my case to believe me.

The urgent need for training and understanding of domestic and sexual abuse and violence within our legal system must be acknowledged. It can't be optional for judges to know about, and believe in, the prevalence of abuse, nor should it be optional to educate purveyors of justice about what justice is for survivors. Abuse is running rampant in homes, and our judges don't see it. The system must know that these challenges start the moment survivors file and continue well past the date in court. Judges must be trauma informed and educated on the dynamics survivors face so they can play the pivotal roles they are elected to play. Without training, judges go blindly into potentially serious situations, particularly for children, who are most vulnerable.

Abuse knows no age or gender, and extends far beyond physical violence. Coercive control is a significant form of abuse. I was verbally assaulted, threatened, humiliated, blamed, and gaslighted my entire marriage. This was obviously not acknowledged by my ex. Judges need to understand that attorneys often DO NOT CARE if their client is an abuser. Equally important is awareness of loopholes that abusers can exploit. Our judges must approach cases with the knowledge that abusers prioritize winning over justice. It's the judge's responsibility to see through the deception and find the truth, especially when the survivor doesn't have an attorney and the abuser does. That alone should speak volumes. Judges must be trained to identify red flags like this that point to abuse and trauma. My own experience is a testament to this; my abuser had an attorney and I did not. He spun a web of lies. Despite my many attempts to disclose the truth, it fell on deaf ears because his attorneys worked for him. I wasn't allowed to speak to the judge directly, so my voice was not heard.

The adversarial nature of our legal system dismisses real human suffering. Court is a game of money and power, where the truth is subjective and survivors are silenced. This system can, and does, inadvertently protect the abuser. When the signs of trauma and abuse are missed or ignored, judges' rulings can subject victims to further abuse. This happened with my children. Spending time with their father wasn't against the law, so their father "won" court-ordered time despite their begging not to be forced. This gave him a new kind of power, which he called "the law" and held over his children and me as a threat.

Ongoing training that emphasizes the nuances of domestic abuse can't be optional. These are real lives that are being further destroyed by a system that should be protecting them. I urge you to support initiatives that enhance judges' ability to recognize and respond to domestic and sexual abuse and violence. Training and awareness is essential for creating a judicial environment that validates victims' experiences and restores faith in the system. Please pass Senate Bill 710. It's up to judges to make final rulings that keep people safe. This training will literally save lives.