

I am a current foster parent from Baltimore City. I am here in support of HB 893, which allows foster, pre-adoptive, and kinship parents a seat at the table in court.

My foster care journey began in November 2019. I am a single foster mother, and I have had 5 children in my home. Three children were placed with relatives within a short period of time (3-14 days). One child was reunified with her mother within 3 months, and my current foster son has been with me for over a year. Throughout my experiences, I have been invited to court once in January 2021 to share information on my foster son. He is 13 months today, and he came into my home at 4 days old.

I was not aware of my rights, and I naively assumed that sufficient information would be provided to me during my training. The truth is that I have found discrepancies with the information from training and day-to-day of foster care. Between the 8 social workers my foster children have been assigned, the procedures were starkly different. More recently, I have tried to learn as much as possible so that I can advocate for these children with the social workers to ensure that decisions are made in the children's best interests.

My current foster son was placed with a family member at 5 weeks old. I was absolutely dumbfounded as the parent that the court system said could not care for him was living in that relative's home. I figured that I missed something along the way or had not been fully informed. I had been encouraged by the case worker to speak with the biological parents, and a visit was set up with them for the first time without the case worker present at a doctor's appointment. In hindsight, this was not safe nor appropriate. Both parents have since been in jail, and one of them is diagnosed with a significant mental health disorder.

I felt my only way to know that this baby was safe would be to continue my relationship with the biological mother. Once he was placed with the relative, she asked me to take him over weekends with the relative's approval. At one point she asked to bring him to my home to stay with me as she stated the relative had kicked them both out of the home. Once again, she did not have any custody at this time and was only supposed to have supervised visits with her son. I reported this to his case worker who told me she was no longer on the case and would pass the information on to his current case worker at that time.

Fast forward to a fourth case worker and pending transition back to the same relative who allowed my foster son to be put in harm's way. I greatly feel that I could have assisted with putting the pieces of this case together if given the opportunity to be present in court. Out of all the adults in this case including DSS workers and biological family members, I know my foster son and his journey the most. I have asked case workers and my foster son's lawyer questions throughout this entire process, and just recently did I find out that I can make a statement at court. I am frustrated with the system, the processes, and the communication because at the crux of it all is a child, an innocent child.

I want to be very clear that I became a foster parent for one reason and one reason only. I have the emotional and financial means to love children in need. My reason for fostering is not to keep children away from their biological families. I do, though, care deeply that children are safe and not cycled through this system simply because laws favor biological family members. This 13-month-old baby has been placed in foster care two times already. Another 15-month-old baby that I had for a two-week period was in foster care for a second time as well. These early years are crucial in the development of the brain and transitions and trauma greatly

impact that development. If I can provide clarity in a court room regarding a child that is within my home, I would take that opportunity to share facts related to the case and keeping the child at the forefront of the conversation. With all my being, I hope mostly that all these children are safe and protected once they leave my home.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story.