

## **Testimony for HB 893--favorable**

Hello. My name is Andrea Widener, and I was a foster parent in Montgomery County for 9 years and adopted my now 13 year old daughter from foster care when she was 7.

I became interested foster parents becoming a part of the court process after I was removed from a court hearing about my foster son, who had lived with me for 21 months, from age 11 months to 2 years, 9 months. By that time, he had at least three social workers and information that was important to his health and wellbeing--in this case drug and alcohol exposure--was not being transferred from one worker to the next. I was concerned that the judge in his case didn't know the full story about my foster son. But I was not allowed to be in the courtroom to find out. That made me realize how important it is for foster parents to be part of the court process.

I want to talk about the right for foster parents and kinship parents to become a party to their foster children's court case nationwide. In our research, over 20 states already allow foster parents a seat at the table in court in various ways and at various times. The most common is states, like Colorado, and New York, that allow it after children have been in their home a certain number of months. We have modeled this bill after the District of Columbia, which allows foster parents to become part of the court process after 12 months. In all cases this has become a normal part of the court process and has not bogged down the system.

Allowing foster parents to participate in court hearings will not change the system or give foster parents the same standing as birth parents. It will just allow judges to have a more complete picture of the children from the people who are taking care of them 24 hours a day, rather than those who might just see them once a month or once every six months. It doesn't take long before a foster parent knows more about a child in their care than anyone else in the system.

It will also not slow down the court system. We think that foster parents will actually help speed up the process by pushing counties to find permanent homes for children as soon as possible, whether that be reunification with birth families, placement with relatives, or adoption by nonrelatives. Maryland is fourth from the bottom in the nation in the percentage of foster children who find permanent homes each year -- right between North and South Dakota. I have also included that federal data as written testimony so you can review it. Maryland should be doing better.

I want to briefly mention confidentiality. I know what is one argument made against allowing foster parents to become more of the process is privacy of birth parents. But like everyone else involved in the system, we have to sign a strict confidentiality agreement when we become foster parents and can be prosecuted for sharing information about birth parents. Having more information about what children have gone through with their birth parents can help us help the traumatized children in our care. We think doing what is best for children is worth the tradeoff.

Thank you for your time.