

My husband and I have been foster parents since August 2018. We are writing to urge you to support and pass **HB 893**, which allows foster, pre-adoptive and kinship parents a seat at the table in court so that we can more fully and effectively support and, in the case of babies and toddlers, speak for the children in our care.

In our most recent case, the toddler who is sleeping in our crib could have been spared trauma and pain had we been allowed to stay for hearings, read court reports or other documents and been included when decisions were made about him. But instead, he was removed twice from his biological parents after his safety was compromised, adding hardship to everyone involved. Our voice could have prevented the second event from ever happening.

Five months after being placed into care because of his parents' neglect due to drug abuse, he was reunified with his parents. This happened after the child's lawyer and social worker had changed, so we were the only consistent adults since he entered foster care. While we did our best to share our foster child's story and the parents' behaviors, it is unknown if they and the magistrate were fully aware of our observations or if it was even discussed at the hearing.

We were in a unique position to have best advocated and shared information about concerns about the biological parents. We saw them before and after unsupervised visits when they were slurring speech and had glazed eyes that they struggled to keep open. Once, we picked him up with a massive bruise on his forehead from a fall on a tile floor. His parents said they turned their heads away while he was playing with a walker toy. He was not even able to stand on his own at this time, so it was concerning to us that he was playing with the toy. If we had had a seat at the table all along, the court would have had fuller information and been able to decide with a complete picture of our foster child's story.

Instead he was hastily reunified with his biological parents for six weeks, after the court received only pieces of the full story from adults new to the case, only to return to us after a case worker visited the house to find the biological parents passed out after a drug high. Our foster baby was one-year-old at the time, crawling on the floor with a knife in one hand and a bottle of drugs in the other. Luckily, he did not ingest any.

The current parameters in Maryland for foster and kinship parents to be allowed to speak in court, but not stay for hearings, does not provide us a full opportunity to advocate for children we love and care for. In our case, we were discouraged from attending hearings and were not always told of times and dates of hearings. But we are with our foster children every day, loving them, bonding with them, providing them safe homes. We have direct observations of birth parents and their children. Personal lawyers, case workers, and magistrates involved with the children often change during the course of their time in care. However, we foster parents are the consistent presence in their lives, which gives us a unique opportunity to provide information that spans the entire course of their time in care. We understand the complexities of cases, and are only asking for our voice to be one of the many who care for our foster kids at all hearings that pertain to them.

Due to the pandemic, much of the parental visitation has been virtual. We again have been a primary witness to the parents' interactions with their son. We again have observed concerning behaviors from the birth parents during these virtual visits. Though we consistently share observations with our foster child's social worker and lawyer, we don't get to do that in court. This matters because we have first-hand knowledge and observations that need to be discussed for the wellbeing of our foster child. That's why we urge you to support and pass **HB 893**, so that foster families have a seat at the table to be able to more fully and effectively advocate for the best interest of the children we grow to love so deeply.

Sincerely,  
Rachel & Kevin Okun