

Testimony in Support of House Bill : 1178  
Peace Orders and Protective Orders – Coercive Control

You may think that if a person is safe from physical harm that current law is sufficient to protect someone from abuse. **YOU ARE WRONG.** Coercive abuse is more insidious than a shove or a punch that results in cuts, bruises and sometimes broken bones. Coercive abuse can be more invasive in one's daily life than any single act of physical or sexual violence. A coercive abuser uses an array of strategies to exercise power and control over another person, often without every laying a hand on them. Although coercive control tactics are recognized as forms of abuse throughout clinical psychology and in domestic violence recovery programs nationwide, there is currently **NO LAW** in Maryland that exists to protect victims of abuse who exhibit no visible marks.

Abuse, as defined in Maryland law, currently means any act that causes bodily harm or an act that places a person eligible for relief in fear of imminent serious bodily harm, assault, rape, or sexual offense, false imprisonment, or stalking. While these definitions of abuse are accurate, they are definitely incomplete.

If coercive control of an individual does not manifest itself by a show of blatant physical symptoms, how is it recognized as abuse of the victim? The Duluth Model of Power and Control in relationships, as provided in your testimony packet and shown on the placard, describes patterns of low-level violent behavior that constitute coercive control and abuse. Hidden beneath the outward signs of physical abuse are acts of intimidation, coercion, and threats of economic and emotional abuse, isolation, blame shifting, use of children as pawns and use of privilege over the victim. Victims of coercive control are often subjected to stringent control of their finances, control of their children, and control of their daily decision-making. This controlling behavior by the abuser forces the victim to act or behave against their will in the way the abuser directs. For the victim, coercive control becomes a prison where all independent thought and actions by the victim are stripped away by the domination of the abuser. As the abuse escalates, the victim is robbed of any personal freedom. Ultimately, the effects of coercive control leaves long-lasting emotional and psychological damage.

As a victim of coercive abuse/control, I experienced fear every day. My abuser stalked me at work, on the campus at the college I attend, at home and in public. Under threat of worse abuse, he forced me to remain in contact with him, to reveal my whereabouts at all times, and to meet him against my will. He used intimidation and emotional abuse to control where I went, who I saw, and who I spoke to on a daily basis. He jealously scrutinized everything I wore, said and did. Without my knowledge or consent, he made a key to my car and planted a tracking device in order to keep tabs on my movements. I lived in an upscale community in Howard County; this gave him ample opportunity to observe me from afar while I was out walking my dog or chatting with a neighbor. My neighbors saw him near my home at odd hours, day and night. When I reported him to the police, I was told there was not much they could do unless I could prove that he violated a law. My abuser knew this.... He mocked me and **BLAMED ME** for the abuse.

For **THREE YEARS**, my abuser threatened to hurt my loved ones, threatened to make me lose my job, and threatened to make me lose my home. He even took steps to interfere with my education, if I was non-compliant. The effect of the abuse became so weighty on my psyche and so serious in nature that I considered changing my name and leaving the area in an all-out

attempt to escape the prison he constructed for me with his coercive control. My every thought was to regain my personal freedom. I even considered suicide.

It wasn't until my abuser made threats of imminent physical harm via text messages was I able to obtain relief given the current definition of abuse in Maryland peace order and protective order statutes. HE FINALLY MADE A MISTAKE. Today, with the help of the State's Attorney in Howard County, the abuser is on probation for criminal telephone misuse. The coercive control I suffered for three long years propelled me to seek and obtain the right to conceal carry. He can no longer control me, but he is still out there.

I currently facilitate a blog for victims of coercive control giving women a sounding board to communicate with each other. BUT YOU CAN HELP MORE.....

COERCIVE CONTROL, as set forth in HOUSE BILL 1352, succinctly describes the abusive behaviors that constitute non-physical forms of abuse not currently addressed in Maryland law.

What does this proposed legislation do for women like me? This new language for the Peace Order and Protective Order statutes gives victims of coercive abuse a greater chance at protection, more incentive to report abuse and the possibility of breaking free from the prison of control whose warden is the abuser. With knowledge that Maryland recognizes this form of low-level non-impact violence, the victim has a greater assurance that the abuse will stop. Your support and passing of HOUSE BILL 1352 sends a clear and present message to the abuser that coercive control is NOT TOLERATED in Maryland.

**PLEASE SEND A FAVORABLE REPORT FOR HB 1178 AND SUPPORT THIS IMPORTANT PROPOSED LEGISLATION.**

**TAKE THE CONTROL AWAY FROM THE ABUSER!!!!**

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