

## Testimony of Todd Peterson

February 11, 2025

### Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

My name is Todd Peterson, and I reside in West Fargo. I am here today to testify in strong support of the long-overdue Rebuttable Shared Parenting Bill. While I have a shared parenting judgment in my case and have no personal stake in this bill's passage, I have witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of North Dakota's family court system on children, families, and communities. The harm caused by our current laws extends far beyond the courtroom, contributing to increased rates of child abuse, teenage pregnancies, domestic violence, drug addiction, incarceration, and even sex trafficking. These issues are symptoms of a fundamentally broken system, and each year, approximately 600 North Dakota children bear this burden.

Our existing system is built upon the **14 Best Interest Factors**, which, rather than serving children, foster conflict, prolong litigation, and strip children of half of their essential parental support system. The moment parents file for separation or divorce, they are presented with these 14 factors, often weaponized to paint the other parent in the worst possible light. This encourages false accusations and unnecessary legal battles, all before a judge who has never met the children in question.

The result? Judges frequently cite subjective opinions, "perceived" safety concerns and remove a fit parent from a child's life, granting only limited visitation. Research consistently shows that in such cases, the accusing parent often engages in **parental alienation**, a form of psychological abuse more damaging than physical harm. This process—where one parent systematically erodes the child's relationship with the other—has lifelong consequences. The effects are devastating, and there is no cure for the emotional scars it leaves behind.

### The Realities of Parental Alienation:

- Children are told, *"Your mom/dad doesn't love you, or we'd still be a family."*
- They hear, *"If your mom/dad really cared, they would spend more time with you."*
- Friends, extended family, and even churches are manipulated into isolating the targeted parent.
- Parents are cut out of a child's life—doctors, counselors, sports, and even faith communities are systematically changed to sever the parental bond.

Parental alienation takes hold within **30-60 days**. Research shows that once a child's time with one parent drops below **40%**, alienation becomes increasingly likely. However, at a **50/50 shared parenting level, alienation is nearly impossible**, as children maintain meaningful relationships with both parents.

### The Broader Consequences of Our Broken System:

This crisis does not end with the family unit. The removal of a parent from a child's life leads to long-term societal harm. Consider the following:

### **Sex Trafficking Risk Factors:**

- The trauma inflicted by parent-child separation mirrors the psychological vulnerability seen in trafficking victims.
- Financial devastation due to costly custody battles increases instability—another key risk factor.
- Mental health decline and substance abuse, also common results of custody battles, leave children more susceptible to exploitation.

### **Suicide and Mental Health Crisis:**

- **63% of teenagers who die by suicide come from single-parent or majority-parent homes.**
- Emerging studies suggest **20-25% of men and 15% of women who die by suicide are alienated parents.** In North Dakota alone, this could equate to **40-70 lives lost annually** due to current custody laws.

### **School Shootings and Public Safety:**

- Since 2008, school shootings have increased **335%**. Alarmingly, **86% of school shooters come from single-parent or majority-parent homes.**
- These children experience extreme distress, isolation, and depression, exacerbated by a system that removes loving, stabilizing parents from their lives.

### **The Evidence in Favor of Shared Parenting:**

The data supporting **Rebuttable Shared Parenting** is overwhelming:

1. **Child abuse decreases** with shared parenting (See Sources, Point 15).
2. **Teen pregnancies drop** significantly (See Sources, Point 12).
3. **Abortion rates decline** as parental support increases (See Sources, Point 13).
4. **Suicide rates among teenagers and alienated parents decrease** (See Sources, Points 1, 36).
5. **Public safety improves**, with reductions in violent crime (See Sources, Point 34).
6. **School shootings and gun violence decrease** (See Sources, Points 4, 5).
7. **Substance abuse among children plummets** (See Sources, Point 3).
8. **Juvenile incarceration rates drop**, as **70% of detained youth** come from single-parent homes (See Sources, Point 14).
9. **85% of prison inmates were raised in single or majority-parent homes** (See Sources, Point 19).
10. **Taxpayer burdens lessen**, as crime, domestic violence, and welfare dependency decrease (See Sources, Points 18, 20, 32).

## **The Success of Shared Parenting in Other States:**

Arkansas implemented a **50/50 shared parenting law** in 2021, requiring **clear and convincing evidence** to justify unequal parenting time. Since then:

- **Divorces have declined dramatically**, dropping from approximately 20,000 per year to **17,858**. That is a decrease of 1,600 divorce cases per year!
- **Litigation has decreased**, preserving financial and emotional resources for families.
- **Orders of Protection decreased** 382 fewer cases per year and trending down
- **The state's population has grown**, the state's population has grown by 63,000 citizens during this period, further underscoring the remarkable decline in divorce cases and demonstrating that shared parenting laws contribute to stronger, more stable families.

Kentucky implemented Rebuttable Shared Parenting law in 2017/18, requiring a preponderance of evidence to justify unequal parenting time. Since then:

- **Domestic violence cases significantly declined**, domestic violence has dropped 50% statewide in the (IPV) Intimate Partner Violence Column that gets tallied for domestic violence associated with separation or divorce.
- **Litigation has decreased by 1,856 the year following passage**, preserving financial and emotional resources for families

## **North Dakotans Overwhelmingly Support Shared Parenting:**

A **November 2024 poll** showed:

- **94% of North Dakotans** believe children should have as much time as possible with both parents.
- **91% believe** both parents should have equal rights and responsibilities after separation.
- **80% support** a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting.

## **Conclusion:**

The evidence is clear—our current system is failing North Dakota's children. The **Rebuttable Shared Parenting Bill** is not just about fairness for parents; it is about the well-being, safety, and future of our children and our communities.

I urge you to pass this bill and take the foundational step necessary to protect our children from unnecessary trauma, reduce litigation, and create a more stable and just society.

**Sincerely,**

Todd Peterson  
West Fargo, ND  
701-831-9807