

Honorable Members of the House Judicial Committee,

My name is Halle Peterson, and I come from a divorced home, but I am in no way broken, brainwashed, or feeble-minded as my father has described me to be. Today, I am here to strongly oppose House Bill 1242, which my father proposed, as I firmly believe its passage will have devastating consequences for countless children in North Dakota. Although I am 18 years old and this bill will not directly affect me, I cannot, in good conscience, remain silent. It is my fervent hope that the traumas I endured will serve as a powerful cautionary tale, compelling us to protect children like me and my siblings from needless suffering in a court system that should look out for and protect them.

I speak for those who do not have a voice, those who are too young, scared, or powerless to be here today. I hope my experiences prevent other children from enduring the pain and trauma I faced by being forced to spend time with an abusive parent.

This bill will worsen alienation rather than prevent it. The alienation between my father and me resulted from his own words and actions. Abusive behavior is inherently self-alienating, but when a parent refuses to take responsibility, it is often projected onto the spouse and children who are victims. Many fathers' rights groups blame the courts for lost parenting time due to the hurtful environment they create, aiming to weaponize the law to maintain control. Rather than protecting children, this bill creates obstacles, hindering courts and professionals from advocating for children's best interests. It focuses on equal custody, oftentimes causing quick, drastic changes likely leading to greater harm.

Page 2, lines 22-26, presumes shared residential responsibility is best. How can one-size-fits-all be best for all children? Forced time at my father's house was dreadful due to emotional and mental abuse. I didn't feel safe or secure there. One night, after visiting a friend, I went to bed and made sure to lock the door of my bedroom. Around midnight, my dad unlocked the door. He angrily informed me that I needed to stop spending time with my friends and accused them of brainwashing me against him. My father labeled me as lost, insisting that I could not think for myself and that my thoughts, feelings and memories of what he had done were not my own, but were due to manipulation. Noting his rising anger and inability to discuss things calmly, I asked him to leave the room so I could sleep. He refused, insisting that this matter be addressed immediately. His intensity accelerated, and I felt utterly exhausted, confused, and scared. My heart was racing, as I felt trapped in my room with him. After nearly an hour of distressing conversation, he left my room, livid. If I ever disagreed with him, it led to insults and threats, worsening the situation. This bill would have forced me to endure more emotional and mental abuse, without anyone ever having a chance to consider if it were truly the best situation for me and my siblings.

Instead of examining his own behavior, my father has continued to accuse me of being lost and brainwashed. This was his excuse for why I no longer wanted to visit him, but the truth is his actions caused the breakdown. He blamed others for alienating me, but he was self-alienating. Had this bill been in place when my mom fled, I would have spent more time in an environment of emotional and mental abuse. I learned to hide, lock myself in rooms when he was angry, and quietly endure his accusations. Sometimes, I tried to escape for a short drive, but he would often block me and threaten to call the police. It caused me to be in states of fight or flight, and turning 18 could not come soon enough.

I testified in a previous hearing regarding Senate Bill 2184 and 2186 that several other incidents occurred while we were alone with my father. One time, my dad angrily locked us in the apartment and pushed us around. We were able to lock ourselves in my brother's room and use the phone we had hidden to call for help. Yet when the police came, they did not intervene further. Somehow, the incident did not seem bad enough to them. Another time, I fled after a very disturbing talk about how I should submit to my husband and never leave a marriage for anything except physical abuse. He explained my duty to have sex whenever my future husband wanted it and how my mom didn't fulfill her duties to him. The more I disagreed and told him to stop, the more upset he got, telling me I was not thinking clearly and was brainwashed. I escaped his place and sought refuge at my mom's house, in tears, knowing that I had to go back the next day.

Under this bill, our voices would not be heard. Our abuse would be considered too minor, and emotional suffering and distress would not even come into consideration. Who does it serve to remove this protection, when our current law provides for the consideration of as many factors as possible in determining what is best for children? It seems that this new bill would only benefit those who do not want their hurtful behavior exposed.

Before the separation, my mom stayed home to homeschool us, which worked very well for our family. My dad worked long hours and traveled often. Post-divorce, spending more time at his house drastically changed and disrupted our lives. During the interim period before the custody arrangement was finalized, we primarily lived with my mom and visited our dad. This arrangement felt more stable and normal to us than an immediate 50/50 custody split, which would have been overwhelming and frightening due to his erratic behavior. The initial separation was a very scary time, as his loss of power and control made him even more volatile towards us and anyone who would dare support us, including professionals. Yet this behavior would be considered inadequate to trigger the courts to look at the standards for our best interest.

On page 2, lines 7-8, the bill discusses shared decision-making for parents on major decisions. It is crucial to recognize that not all families can make joint decisions for their child. As I've learned from my own experience and research, a heartbreaking percentage of divorces occur because one parent is fleeing a toxic or abusive situation. I know firsthand how an abusive parent can weaponize the legal system against the other parent and treat children like me as pawns without a voice.

If parents disagree on schooling, who decides? Should a child be removed from a thriving school setting due to a parent's dissatisfaction post-divorce? My dad was always a critic of public schools, but after my mom fled and he learned of her plans to try to smoothly transition us to a small private school, he suddenly changed his mind and asked the judge for public schooling. We expressed our schooling desires to him, but he dismissed us whenever we brought it up. I wrote to the judge, who thankfully ruled in our favor. My dad was furious. We have all thrived in school under the judge's ruling in favor of my mom's plan. I am grateful the judge could prioritize what was best for us when our parents could not agree. This bill could enable abusive parents to instead manipulate the system. It is crucial our laws prioritize children's voices and welfare when many toxic parents may not.

On page 2, line 8, the bill mandates joint spiritual decisions. After my parents' divorce, my mom took us to our familiar church, where I had many friends, a solid support system, and safety reinforced by our pastor. My dad suddenly opposed us going to that church, claiming that it was

brainwashing us. In contrast, he hopped between various churches seeking one which would align with his beliefs. With this bill, it appears that we would not have been allowed to stay at our home church because of his disagreement, causing even more instability and a detrimental loss of support.

I used to feel deeply hurt when my dad accused me of being brainwashed, and I tried in vain to convince him otherwise. Over time, I realized that I was standing with many others whom he labeled as brainwashed, including pastors, judges, parenting investigators, teachers, counselors and the great majority of our lifelong friends. If history is the best predictor of future behavior, then that list will keep growing and I'll continue to be in good company.

When I read my dad's bill, I wondered: Who benefits from stripping courts, counselors, and parenting investigators of their roles? It isn't the children! This bill threatens to dismantle the safeguards that ensure children's well-being and safety. Please resist any attempt to weaken these critical protections. The National Children's Alliance reports that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the U.S. experience child abuse. Living with an abusive parent leads to serious issues like depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Don't weaken protections due to lack of physical abuse evidence.

Every family is different, and a one-size-fits-all approach isn't in the children's best interest. Children's voices and well-being must remain at the forefront of custody decisions. This bill jeopardizes the integrity of children's homes, potentially leaving them in harmful environments rather than providing a sanctuary. Thank you for listening and for providing a protected place for me to share my voice. I'm hopeful that our laws will continue to provide safety for all children. Thank you.

Halle Peterson

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