

Dear Judiciary Senate Committee,

I am writing this testimony in support of the Time Taken, Time Back bill. I am a divorced father of three children living in West Fargo, and I have a personal equal-time shared parenting judgment. While this bill does not affect me directly, I am compelled to advocate for it because of what I have witnessed in the current system. What I have seen horrifies me: our system is unintentionally perpetuating harm, destroying children, families, and communities.

Parental alienation is a form of severe child abuse with lifelong consequences. Research shows that in 10% of divorce cases, one parent severely alienates the other, with moderate to severe alienation occurring in an additional 10%. This means that 20% of divorce cases involve significant harm to children through the destruction of their relationship with one parent. Alienation can occur within 30 to 60 days and has devastating effects, including increased risks of suicide, violent crimes, emotional instability, school dropouts, drug addiction, teenage pregnancies, and even school shootings.

For context, 63% of teenagers who die by suicide come from single-parent or majority-parent homes. Data further suggests that up to 25% of men who die by suicide and 15-20% of women are alienated parents. In North Dakota, this could mean as many as 50 lives lost annually due to parental alienation. This figure does not account for the additional toll of drug overdoses, incarcerations, and other related issues stemming from broken family support structures. These are not just statistics; they represent real people, real children, and real families in our state.

The problem is exacerbated by how the Child Protective Services (CPS) system is being misused. Currently, 83% of CPS reports are found to be unfounded or false. Alienating parents exploit the system by filing false allegations of abuse. CPS, acting out of caution, often removes children from the accused parent for months. Even after investigations prove the allegations false, it can take months more for the courts to restore parenting time. During this time, the alienating parent often consolidates their influence over the child, causing severe emotional and psychological harm.

In some cases, alienating parents use these false allegations to gain leverage, such as requesting to move the children out of state. Even when allegations are proven false, courts often deem it too disruptive to return the children to their original living arrangement. These injustices leave lasting scars on children and families.

The Time Taken, Time Back bill offers a solution. It ensures that time unjustly taken from a parent-child relationship due to false or unfounded CPS allegations is restored. This bill does not punish the reporting parent but removes the incentive to file false reports by restoring the balance in parenting time. Similar legislation passed unanimously in Texas because it is a commonsense approach to protect children and families.

Key Benefits of the Time Taken, Time Back Bill:

1. **Reduces False CPS Claims:** By removing the incentive for alienating parents to file false reports, CPS workers can focus their resources on actual cases of abuse, reducing the risk of overlooked genuine abuse.
2. **Restores Parent-Child Bonds:** Reuniting children with their unjustly separated parent helps rebuild their relationship, promoting emotional and psychological health.
3. **Saves Taxpayer Dollars:** Fewer false claims mean reduced burdens on CPS, law enforcement, and the court system.
4. **Reduces Court Backlogs:** Fewer false claims will lead to fewer court hearings, freeing up resources for genuine cases.
5. **Prevents Child Abuse:** This bill addresses a systemic issue that allows alienating parents to abuse children emotionally by severing their bond with the other parent.

Critics of this bill may argue that it could discourage parents from filing necessary CPS reports. This concern is unfounded. Time Taken, Time Back does not punish parents for filing reports, even when they are unfounded. It simply ensures that the time unjustly taken is returned. Loving parents would never hesitate to file a report if they believed their child was at risk, regardless of potential personal inconvenience. Only an alienating parent would oppose restoring the child's time with their other parent.

Organizations opposing this bill are not addressing the hundreds of annual victims in our state. Lives are being lost due to parental alienation, and we cannot ignore this any longer. The Time Taken, Time Back bill is a step toward justice and healing for children and families in North Dakota. It is a measure that protects our most vulnerable and promotes healthier communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge you to support this critical legislation for the well-being of our children and the future of our state.

Sincerely,
Todd Peterson

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