



Celebrating 50 Years of Advancing Justice

Dear Jessica,

It has been nearly five years since the WLC created our [Collateral Legal Assistance for Survivors \(CLAS\)](#) project which provides free representation to survivors of intimate partner violence on collateral legal issues stemming from their status as survivors. This project was born out of frustration that our attorneys felt when representing victims for protective order hearings only to realize how many other legal issues were related to their case that we were unable to assist with. By creating this project, we are not only able to provide legal representation for divorce and custody, but also landlord/tenant matters, Title IX hearings, and even replevin, all while minimizing retraumatization by keeping clients within our organization and providing warm hand-offs between our projects.

The vast majority of our CLAS cases involve family law matters, primarily divorce and custody. [When couples divorce, abusive parents often use custody proceedings as a way to continue a campaign of control and coercion against the former spouse. Studies show that 25 to 50 percent of disputed custody cases involve domestic violence and that batterers are more likely to seek sole custody than non-abusive partners.](#)

The work we have done with CLAS, and with survivors in general for over 25 years, informs the family-law related legislative work we do in Annapolis, led by our Legal Director, Laure Ruth. This week Laure will be testifying on a full slate of family law bills, bringing our unique lens and expertise to the forefront. It is so important to remember that one size does not fit all when it comes to divorce and custody matters, and that is why it is critical that the experiences of survivors are taken into account when drafting and amending our laws.

Below are just a few of the bills, all in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, we will be focusing on this week.

We are happy to support the following bills.

[SB 28 - Child Custody – Legal Decision Making and Parenting Time](#) (Sponsor: Senator West)

This bill would provide a much-needed overhaul and update to our custody laws in Maryland, codifying existing Maryland case law regarding custody determinations using the best interests of the child standard. It is the revised product of a more than one year Child Custody Decision-Making Commission on which the WLC participated.

[SB 36 – Family Law – Grounds for Divorce](#) (Sponsor: Senator West)

Senate Bill 36 would provide critical updates to Maryland's existing laws regarding divorce, including allowing individuals who still live under the same roof to move forward with divorce proceedings under certain circumstances and reduce the period of required separation before they can file for divorce from 12 months to 6 months. For many people, financial hardships prevent them from physically separating until a divorce is finalized, but the law does not allow them to file until they have lived apart. This will simplify divorce law in Maryland and help people get out of harmful relationships without unnecessary barriers.

**Additionally, we are supporting the following bill,
with some friendly amendments:**

[SB42 - Child Custody - Relocation of Child - Expedited Hearing \(Assurance of Child's Safety Act\)](#) (Sponsor: Senator Carter)

Senate Bill 42 creates a path to an expedited hearing if a parent or custodian of a child plans to relocate. The WLC supports SB 42 with amendments being offered by the sponsor. An expedited hearing for a situation where relocating the child will interfere with another parent's parenting time is valuable, and as amended this bill is a proper avenue for litigants to get court resolution on the issue of relocation if it would otherwise interfere with one parent or custodian's

child access. Of course, we recognize there are often valid reasons for relocation, including escaping from domestic violence, moving to where there is a support system in place for the relocating parent, including family and childcare options, a better job, etc. We get calls about this issue often on our statewide Family Law Hotline. But sometimes the relocation is done for more nefarious purposes and so the parties and, most importantly, children would benefit from an expedited ruling on the matter that is based on the facts and circumstances of the particular parents and child. Senate Bill 42, as amended, will allow the court to consider relocation while maintaining the paramount concern of what is in the best interests of the child.

Finally, we are respectfully opposing the following bill:

[SB13 - Family Law - Custody Evaluators - Qualifications and Training](#)

(Sponsor: Senator Carozza)

Senate Bill 13 would move qualifications for custody evaluators in family law cases from the Maryland Rules to the Maryland Code. While the Women's Law Center appreciates the importance of maintaining rigorous qualifications for these evaluators in custody cases in the state, the appropriate place for addressing these issues is in the Rules, not the Code. Topics and areas of expertise for custody evaluators often change over time, and under this proposal every time new research is developed, or best practices are changed, we would have to come back to the legislature to amend the law. The Rules are a better place for this and still allow custody evaluators to be held to the high standards necessary.

We will provide updates on these bills and others we are working on as session progresses. In the meantime, don't forget to let [your legislators](#) know about what issues matter most to you!

Onward,



P.S. As always, if you appreciate the work we do, whether in the General Assembly or through our [direct legal services](#) across the State, [give here!](#) And if this email was forwarded to you by a friend, make sure to sign up for our legislative alerts [here!](#)

P.P.S. **Save the Date for the WLC's Annual Celebration and Awards Ceremony on May 3rd at 6pm at Citron!** Join us in presenting the Rosalyn B. Bell Award to Marla Zide, Esq.; the Dorothy Beatty Memorial Award to Robyn Elliott; and the Access to Justice Award to Natasha M. Dartigue, Esq. and Debbie Feinstein, Esq. For more information or to buy tickets, click [HERE](#).

P.P.P.S. Save the date for these upcoming events from our partners and friends!

[Maryland Legislative Agenda for Women's 2023 Legislative Briefing](#) - Wednesday, February 1st at 5pm on Zoom

[Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence Annual Memorial Service](#) - Tuesday, February 21st at 4pm on Zoom

The 2023 Gender Justice Rally will be held February 27th in Annapolis. More details to come!

Have an event you'd like to share with us? Send us an [email!](#)

About The Women's Law Center of Maryland

The vision of the Women's Law Center of Maryland is a legal system that provides justice and fairness for women. The Women's Law Center's mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and autonomy of women throughout the State. We work towards this goal by providing direct legal representation, information and referral services, and legislative advocacy.

Our efforts to promote justice, fairness, and equality for women are only possible because of friends like you.

Give Today

The Women's Law Center of Maryland, Inc. is a charitable organization designated as tax-exempt under Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3). A copy of our financial statement is available upon request. Documents and information submitted under the State of Maryland Charitable Solicitations Act are available from the Office of the Secretary of State of Maryland, Annapolis, MD 21401 for the cost of copying and postage.



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