

HB

385

Alaska State Legislature

Session:

State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801
Phone: (907) 465-2995
Fax: (907) 465-6592



Interim:

716 W 4th Avenue, Suite 300
Anchorage, AK 99501-2133
Phone: (907) 269-0250
Fax: (907) 269-0249

Representative Lesil McGuire

Chair, Judiciary Committee

MEMORANDUM

To: Sen. Ralph Seekins, Chair – Senate Judiciary Committee

Cc:

From: Rep. Lesil McGuire

Date: April 20, 2004

Re: Schedule request for HB 385 – “An Act relating to child custody”

Attached you will find a sponsor statement, most recent version of the bill, fiscal notes, and support materials for HB 385.

I would appreciate the opportunity to present this bill to the Senate Judiciary Committee at the earliest possible convenience.

Please feel free to contact my office at x2995 if you have any questions or need additional material.

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SPONSOR STATEMENT

HB 385

"An Act relating to awarding child custody; and providing for an effective date."

Domestic violence is often a significant factor in divorce and child custody proceedings. According to the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in the United States. The American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, and numerous other organizations have recommended that if domestic violence has occurred in a relationship, the offender should not receive sole or joint legal or physical custody of children. A unanimous Joint Resolution of Congress, H. Con. Res. 172, adopted in 1990, urged states to adopt the statutory presumption "that it is detrimental to the child to be placed in the custody of the abusive spouse."

When children witness violence in the home, they have been found to suffer many of the symptoms that are experienced by children who are directly abused. Children exposed to domestic violence face increased risks that they will be killed or injured by the violence, that their emotional, physical and mental development will be adversely affected, and that they will be neglected or abused. We commonly encounter the mistaken assumption among professionals, including judges and custody evaluators, that children are in less danger from a batterer once a couple is no longer living together, when the reality is often the opposite.

By the end of the 2002 legislative session, 23 states had adopted the approach of the Model Code of the Family Violence Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. This model state statute clearly states that there should be a rebuttable presumption that it is detrimental to the child and not in the best interest of the child to be placed in sole custody, joint legal custody, or joint physical custody with the perpetrator of family violence. It emphasizes that the safety and well-being of the child and the parent who is the victim must be primary.

Unfortunately, courts sometimes apply psychological pressures that keep women tied to their abusers. "Friendly parent" statutes ask courts to assess each parent's willingness to co-parent when making custody decisions. Despite their reasonable reluctance to co-parent, battered women may end up being labeled "uncooperative," with an increased risk of losing their children to theirs and their children's abuser. This perpetuates family violence from one generation to the next at great social cost to Alaskan society. Amazingly, "Studies show batterers are able to convince authorities that the victim is unfit or undeserving of sole custody in approximately 70% of challenged cases." (American Judges Association). Friendly parent statutes are often the tool used by abusive parents against the protective parent.

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HB 385 serves to better protect children from the effects of domestic violence by achieving consistency between Alaska child protection statutes and child custody statutes. This bill incorporates the sense of the legislature in AS 47.10.011 (6), (7) & (8) and 1999's House Joint Resolution No. 36 that the effects of witnessing domestic violence is harmful to children, that parenting by a perpetrator of domestic violence places a child at a substantially higher risk of being directly abused, and that the sexual molestation of a child by their parents makes them unfit.

The bill also modifies our statutes "friendly parent" provision that inadvertently harms children, particularly in circumstances involving domestic violence, child abuse/sexual abuse and neglect. Alaska is in the minority of states that still have a "friendly parent" provision that inadvertently harms children, particularly in circumstances involving domestic violence, child abuse/sexual abuse and neglect. Also, while Alaska's child custody statutes specifically mention domestic violence as a factor to be considered, they allow wide discretion and do not give it special weight. It is simply one additional factor when considering the best interests of the child.

Effects of this violence on children have high costs in human lives and to our communities. Research has consistently shown that children who witness violence suffer a wide range of short and long-term emotional and behavioral problems that often follow them for life. These children are at higher risk for psychosomatic disorders, stuttering, anxiety and fears, sleep disruption, excessive crying, problems in school, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual acting out, running away, and even suicide. Boys who witness their fathers' abuse of their mothers or siblings are more likely to inflict severe violence as adults. Data suggest that girls who witness abuse may tolerate abuse as adults more than girls who do not.

Alaska ranks in the top 5 states in the nation for per capita rates of domestic violence. The rate of Alaskan women being killed by a partner is 1.5 times the national average. Alaska has 6 times the national average of reported child sexual assault. In 3 out of 4 reported cases, the victim knew the offender; the most commonly reported type of sexual abuse is a father who commits incest with his daughter--usually the eldest daughter. (AK Dept. of Health & Social Services)

HB 385 sends a clear message that we wish to halt the perpetuation of family violence from generation to generation and that perpetrators will be held accountable.

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SPONSOR STATEMENT

CSHB 385(JUD)

"An Act relating to awarding child custody; and providing for an effective date."

EXPLANATION OF CHANGES
(Between Version Q and Version W)
ADOPTED BY THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

Amendment 1 - Page 4, lines 7
Delete "only"

Page 4, lines 7, after "by"
Delete, "clear and convincing"
Insert "a preponderance of the evidence"

Explanation - These changes amend the original language found in the original version of HB 385 which set the evidentiary requirement to overcome the rebuttable presumption at "clear and convincing evidence". The amendment adopted by the House Judiciary Committee reduced that requirement to "a preponderance of the evidence" which comports to the general evidentiary standard in other civil proceedings. The intent of the amendment is to maintain the rebuttable presumption, but to make the standard more reasonable to overcome.

Amendment 2 - Page 5, line 2, after "parent"
Insert "unless the court finds that the domestic violence renders the parent unable to safely parent the child"

Explanation - The intent of this change was only to recognize the possibility that the abuse by one parent to the other could be so severe as to render the non-abusive parent physically incapable of their parenting responsibilities while recognizing other effects of the abuse do not constitute grounds for denying custody to the non-abusive parent.

Amendment 3 - Page 5, line 2, after "constitute"
Delete "a"
Insert "the sole"

Explanation - The intent of this amendment was to clarify that, in general, suffering from the effects of abuse (psychological, emotional, or otherwise) do not constitute any basis for denying custody to the non-abusive parent except when the court deems those effects to be so severe that the parent is completely incapable of their parental duties.

FISCAL NOTE

STATE OF ALASKA
2004 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Fiscal Note Number: 1
Bill Version: CSHB 385(JUD)
(H) Publish Date: 3/3/04

Revision Date/Time (Note if correction): _____ Dept. Affected: _____
Title Awarding Child Custody BRU Alaska Court System
Component Trial Courts
Sponsor Representative McGuire
Requester _____ Component No. _____

Expenditures/Revenues (Thousands of Dollars)

Note: Amounts do not include inflation unless otherwise noted below.

OPERATING EXPENDITURES	FY 2005	FY 2006	FY 2007	FY 2008	FY 2009	FY 2010
Personal Services						
Travel						
Contractual						
Supplies						
Equipment						
Land & Structures						
Grants & Claims						
Miscellaneous						
TOTAL OPERATING	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

CAPITAL EXPENDITURES						
-----------------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--

CHANGE IN REVENUES ()						
-------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--

FUND SOURCE (Thousands of Dollars)

1002 Federal Receipts						
1003 GF Match						
1004 GF						
1005 GF/Program Receipts						
1037 GF/Mental Health						
Other (Specify Type--Do not abbreviate)						
TOTAL	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Estimate of any current year (FY2004) cost: 0.0

Mark this box (X) if funding for this bill is included in the Governor's FY 2005 budget proposal:

POSITIONS

Full-time						
Part-time						
Temporary						

ANALYSIS: (Attach a separate page if necessary)

The court system does not anticipate any fiscal impact from the passage of HB 385.

Prepared by: Doug Wooliver Administrative Attorney Phone 463-4750
Division Alaska Court System Date/Time 2/25/04 4:33 PM
Approved by: Stephanie Cole Administrative Director by Doug Wooliver Date 2/25/2004
Agency Alaska Court System



AUG./SEPT. 2003

National Conference of State Legislatures LEGISBRIEF

BRIEFING PAPERS ON THE IMPORTANT ISSUES OF THE DAY

VOL. 11, No. 36

When Children Witness Domestic Violence

By Stephanie Walton

Children exposed to violence at home also are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of domestic abuse as adults.

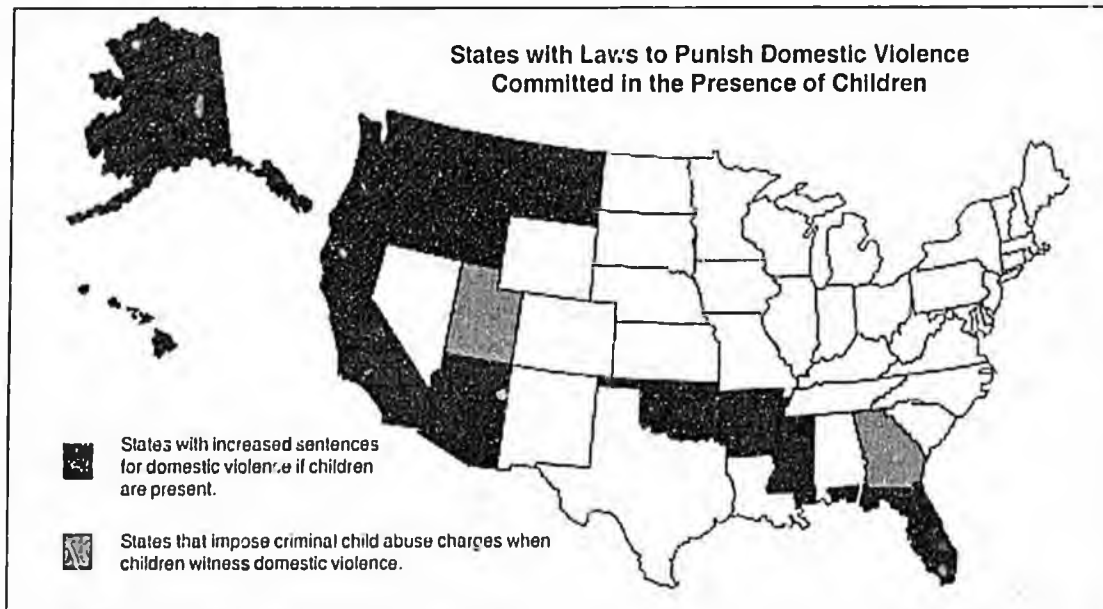
In homes where one partner abuses the other, children also are more likely to be abused. Hundreds of studies have documented the negative effects for children exposed to violence. Even when they aren't physically abused, they can show symptoms of trauma, which include:

- Increased aggression.
- Depression, anxiety and fear.
- Lower scores on verbal, motor and cognitive skills tests.
- Physical symptoms, including headaches, stomach aches, ulcers and asthma.

Children exposed to violence at home also are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of domestic abuse as adults, according to the American Psychological Association.

State Action

At least 12 states allow or mandate increased penalties for a perpetrator if a child witnessed the domestic violence. Most of these laws allow courts to increase sentences, while a few require stiffer sentences. Oklahoma law, for example, requires the minimum penalty for domestic violence to be increased to a six-month sentence if a child is present. There is a one-year sentence for a second or subsequent violation in the presence of a child. In Oregon, a fourth degree domestic violence assault is raised from a Class A misdemeanor to a Class C felony if a child is present. Delaware, Georgia and Utah can charge defendants with a separate crime of child abuse when children witness a violent episode.



In most states, these laws are only a few years old, but their effects are already apparent. In Multnomah County, Ore., felony domestic violence charges rose nearly 150 percent after the stricter sentencing law was passed. Prosecutors in Georgia and Utah report they use the child abuse charges as additional "bargaining chips," leading to more convictions. Law enforcement officers in these states also are more likely to note in their crime reports whether children were present during a domestic violence incident. In addition, prosecutors are more likely to report the affected families to child welfare agencies, even though the laws don't require it.

Advantages and Disadvantages. Proponents of stiffer laws argue that criminal laws for violence in the presence of a child increase batterer accountability. In some states children become eligible for crime victim services and compensation. The laws also increase public awareness of the harm on children. Also, prosecutors have another way to pursue charges if the adult victim doesn't cooperate. Finally, a study commissioned by the National Institute of Justice suggests that such laws educate prosecutors, police and the courts about the harmful effects on children.

Opponents argue that prosecutors who use these laws as bargaining chips trivialize the real damage inflicted on children. They also note that since prosecutors are more likely to report families to child welfare agencies in states with these laws, workers need to be trained to understand the dynamics of family violence. Without training, they may hold victims responsible for exposing children to violence and remove them from the family. This can further traumatize both the children and the victim parent—although in some instances, the removal may be warranted. Children also may be required to testify against the batterer in court. This can frighten and confuse them, especially if the batterer is a parent. Finally, opponents say these laws increase the burden on the criminal justice system when state budgets already are severely strained.

Other Approaches. Some states have taken different approaches. Alaska law includes witnessing domestic violence as civil child maltreatment, and authorizes child welfare intervention. Advocates claim, however, that, in some cases, removing children penalizes the victim for the perpetrator's behavior. She may be held responsible for failing to protect her children. Child welfare agencies are removing children from homes even under more general "failure to protect" regulations.

Other states, including Alaska, focus efforts at the local level, providing cross-training for domestic violence workers, child welfare agencies, police officers, prosecutors, judges, probation officers and others who need to understand how witnessing domestic violence affects children. Localities in Colorado, Massachusetts and a number of other states place domestic violence advocates in child welfare offices to increase communication and understanding between the two systems.

It will take time to understand how states can best respond to help domestic violence victims and their children, but everyone agrees on the ultimate goal: keeping families safe.

Selected References

- Christlan, Steve. "Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence: Is It Child Abuse?" *State Legislative Report* (National Conference of State Legislatures) 27, no. 1 (January 2002).
- Schechter, Susan, and Jeffrey L. Edleson. *Effective Interventions in Domestic Violence & Child Maltreatment Cases: Guidelines for Policy and Practice*. Reno, Nev: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1999.
- Whitcomb, Debra. "Prosecutors, Kids, and Domestic Violence Cases." *NIJ Journal*, no. 248 (2002).

Contact for More Information

Stephanie Walton
NCSL—Denver
(303) 364-7700 ext. 1552
stephanie.walton@ncsl.org

Proponents of stiffer laws argue that they increase batterer accountability.

Opponents argue that prosecutors may hold victims responsible for exposing children to violence.

Other states focus efforts at the local level.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Any time you go through a process of major social change, you have four stages of response. The first is anger; the second is retribution; the third is grudging acceptance. In the fourth stage, people all of a sudden get it"¹

While this quote by Donna Lopiano is related to the acceptance of women in sports and the effect of Title IX, it could apply equally to the response of legislatures and courts to domestic violence over the last twenty-five years. Given the historical condonation of such violence by the U.S. legal system, we are indeed going through a process of major social change as we advocate for the same system to take a stand against domestic violence. In the custody arena, laws first allowing, then mandating that courts consider domestic abuse, and most recently creating presumptions against batterers as custodial parents, have met with very mixed results. While some states seem to have made this transition without significant problems, other states have seen a backlash in the courts' response to such presumptions.

This article will examine the effect of state statutes creating a rebuttable presumption against custody to batterers. Part II will trace the development of these presumption statutes, situating them within historical trends in custody law. Part III will describe the statutes, including how they vary. Part IV will examine how the presumption statutes are being implemented, including the backlash seen in some jurisdictions. Part V will propose solutions to problems with implementation of presumption statutes. These include legislative amendments; training for judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem, mediators, and evaluators; seeking clarification from appellate courts; funding for attorneys for indigent victims of

1. Bill Blum, *Fighting Over Title IX*, CAL. LAW, Feb. 2001, at 90 (quoting Donna Lopiano, Executive Director, Women's Sports Foundation).

domestic violence; and community organizing. The conclusion, Part VI, notes that while the passage of such statutes is not a "quick fix" to the fundamental problems presented by these cases, the process of enactment and implementation of the presumption statutes is worthwhile, as another step on the long road toward the elimination of domestic violence.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF REBUTTABLE PRESUMPTION STATUTES

A. *Historical Custody Standards*

Until the 1970s and the advent of no-fault divorce, abuse by one parent of the other was considered quite relevant to custody decisions throughout the United States, as this was evidence of the abuser's poor morals.² While the rate of divorce was low, victims of domestic violence were usually awarded custody of the parties' children.³

A significant change in custody decisions took place in the 1970s, as most U.S. states amended their divorce laws from fault-based divorce to no-fault divorce.⁴ Under the new regime, domestic violence was no longer seen as relevant by divorce courts; judges were trained to look toward the future, not admit evidence of past misdeeds, and to consider the parents as generally equally qualified to be custodians of children.⁵ Unless the children were physically harmed, what a husband did to his wife⁶ was not seen as relevant to his ability to parent.⁷

No-fault divorce was generally hailed as a progressive move,

2. Naomi R. Cahn, *Civil Images Of Battered Women: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Child Custody Decisions*, 44 VAND. L. REV. 1041, 1043 (1991).

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* See also Note, *Developments in the Law: Legal Response to Domestic Violence, VI. Battered Women and Child Custody Decisionmaking*, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1597, 1597 (1993).

5. Lynne R. Kurtz, *Protecting New York's Children: An Argument for the Creation of a Rebuttable Presumption Against Awarding a Spouse Abuser Custody of a Child*, 60 ALB. L. REV. 1345, 1347 (1997).

6. While domestic violence can be committed by either sex, most domestic violence is committed by men against women. The U.S. Dept. of Justice reported in 1998 that a woman is seven to fourteen times more likely to be severely injured by an intimate than a man is. Patricia Tjaden & Nancy Thoennes, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey*, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE, at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/172837.pdf> (last visited Oct. 3, 2001).

7. Cahn, *supra* note 2, at 1044; Kurtz, *supra* note 5, at 1347.

both by feminists and by fathers' rights groups.⁸ Fathers' rights groups celebrated this as a move away from what they saw as gender bias, whereby mothers were allegedly awarded custody solely by virtue of their sex. However, the emphasis on no longer making findings of fault set the stage for courts refusing to consider domestic violence as a relevant factor in custody decisions. Domestic violence was not seen as affecting the best interests of the child unless the child was also physically abused.⁹ And even though the overlap between partner abuse and physical child abuse is great,¹⁰ courts often failed to acknowledge this connection in making custody decisions.¹¹

B. Move To Allow, Then Require Courts To Consider Domestic Violence In Custody Decisions

By the 1980's, the domestic violence movement had become a vocal presence, and was developing some sophistication in terms of changing entrenched policies. Advocates began to call for legislators and courts to protect children from batterers.¹² Feminists stressed the harmful effects of exposure to domestic violence on children, and stated that it is not actually possible to be a violent husband and a good father.¹³

At the same time, there was a strong trend toward trying to keep fathers close to their children. Father's rights groups pushed for, and succeeded in getting, legislation stressing the importance of joint custody.¹⁴ Families were no longer seen as "broken," but

8. LENORE J. WEITZMAN, *THE DIVORCE REVOLUTION* (1985); MICHAEL WHEELER, *NO-FAULT DIVORCE* (1974); Erin R. Melnick, *Reaffirming No-Fault Divorce: Supplementing Formal Equality with Substantive Change*, 75 *IND. L. J.* 711, 714 (2000); Herma Hill Kay, *Equality and Difference: A Perspective on No-Fault Divorce and Its Aftermath*, 56 *U. CIN. L. REV.* 1, 2 (1987). See generally, Herma Hill Kay, *An Appraisal of California's No-Fault Divorce Law*, 75 *CAL. L. REV.* 291 (1987); Howard Krom, *California's Divorce Law Reform: A Historical Analysis*, 1 *PAC. L. J.* 156 (1970).

9. Charlotte Germane et al., *Mandatory Custody Mediation and Joint Custody Orders in California: The Danger for Victims of Domestic Violence*, 1 *WOMEN'S L.J.* 175, 179 (1985).

10. PETER G. JAFFE ET AL., *CHILDREN OF BATTERED WOMEN*, 20-21 (1990); see *infra* note 35 (citing social science literature about effects of domestic violence on children).

11. Germane et al., *supra* note 9.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. Nancy K. Lemon, *Joint Custody as a Statutory Presumption: California's New Civil Code Sections 4600 and 4600.5*, 11 *GOLDEN GATE U. L. REV.* 485, 505, 510, 516 (1981); Germane et al., *supra* note 9, at 181-182.

instead were "in transition," with the goal being that both parents were still involved in their children's lives.¹⁵ In some cases, courts gave fathers more time with their children than they had generally spent with them while living with the children's mother; in these cases the goal was not merely to continue the father/child relationship, but to try to strengthen it.

Legislatures started to respond to both these groups. Some states enacted laws stating that domestic violence could be taken into account in making custody decisions, but leaving the decision up to the judge whether or not to even admit such evidence.¹⁶ Other states went further, actually mandating that judges consider domestic violence.¹⁷

A few states passed laws stating that perpetration of domestic violence was detrimental to children.¹⁸ Others required that judges state their reasons for awarding custody to alleged or proven batterers on the record¹⁹ or make findings of fact that joint custody is not detrimental to the children despite the violence, if joint custody were granted in a domestic violence case.²⁰

Meanwhile, many states were also enacting laws allowing for or preferring joint custody of children. Some states created presumptions favoring joint custody if the parents agreed to it²¹ or required judges to state their reasons for denying joint custody.²²

In all too many cases, these two trends worked at cross-purposes. Given the high rates of domestic violence in the U.S.,²³ especially among divorcing couples,²⁴ there were many cases in

15. Germane et al., *supra* note 9, at 181-82.

16. See Barbara J. Hart, *Custody and Visitation Decision-Making When There are Allegations of Domestic Violence*, at <http://www.mincava.tuinn.edu/hart/telecon.htm>.

17. See, e.g., ALASKA STAT. § 25.20.090 (Michie 2000); OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 3109.04 (West 2000).

18. The Family Violence Project of the Nat. Council of Juv. & Fam. Ct. Judges, *Family Violence in Child Custody Statutes: An Analysis of State Codes and Legal Practice*, 29 FAM. L. Q. 199, 225-227 (1995) [hereinafter Family Violence Project].

19. See, e.g., CAL. FAM. CODE § 3011 (West 1994), N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 458:17(II)(c) (1992).

20. See, e.g., N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 458:17(II)(c) (1992); OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 3109.04 (West 2000).

21. See, e.g., CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 46b-56a (1995); N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 458:17(II)(c) (1992); see also Lemon, *supra* note 14, at 500 (discussing the legislative history of the first joint custody statute in the U.S.).

22. See, e.g., CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 46b-56a (1995); N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 458:17(II)(c) (1992).

23. Tjaden & Thoennes, *supra* note 6.

24. Estimates of the incidence of wife-beating range from at least one in three marriages to up to one-half of all marriages. M. STRAUS ET AL., BEHIND CLOSED

which courts were presented with one parent arguing for joint custody and the other parent arguing that the history of domestic violence should preclude such a decision. Starting in 1991, some states resolved this conflict by enacting statutes creating a presumption against custody to batterers.²⁵

III. INCREASING SUPPORT FOR ENACTMENT OF REBUTTABLE PRESUMPTIONS AGAINST CUSTODY TO BATTERERS

A. Policy Statements

There were several bases for this new trend. The first U.S. national policy statement supporting a rebuttable presumption in domestic violence cases was H. R. Congressional Resolution 172: "It is the sense of Congress that, for purposes of determining child custody, credible evidence of physical abuse of a spouse should create a statutory presumption that it is detrimental to the child to be placed in the custody of the abusive spouse."²⁶ While Congress does not have the authority to tell states how to handle custody decisions, this Resolution was intended to encourage states to pass their own statutes establishing such presumptions.

In 1994, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges released the Model Code on Domestic and Family Violence.²⁷ This Code was developed in conjunction with legislators, the American Bar Association, the American Medical Association, domestic violence experts, prosecutors, and defense counsel over a period of three years.²⁸ Section 401 of the Model Code states:

In every proceeding where there is at issue a dispute as to

DOORS: VIOLENCE IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY 31 (1980); Eisenberg & Micklow, *The Assaulted Wife: 'Catch 22' Revisited*, 3 WOMEN'S RTS. L. REP. 138 (1977); Laurie Woods, *Litigation on Behalf of Battered Women*, 7 WOMEN'S RTS. L. REP. 39, 41 (1981). See also HOFF ET AL., INTERSTATE CHILD CUSTODY DISPUTES AND PARENTAL KIDNAPPING: POLICY, PRACTICE AND LAW 3-15 (1982) (scope of wife battering and the extent of underreporting).

25. Family Violence Project, *supra* note 18, at 208.

26. H.R.J. Res. 172, 101st Cong. (1994) (sponsored by Rep. Constance Morella and passed unanimously on Oct. 25, 1990).

27. NAT. COUNCIL OF JUV. AND FAM. CT. JUDGES, MODEL CODE ON DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE (1994), [hereinafter MODEL CODE].

28. Christine L. Bailey & Maureen Sheeran, *The Model Code on Domestic and Family Violence: A Call for Legislative Action and Community Response*, NEV. PUB. AFF. REV. 24 (Legis. Issues: 1995).

the custody of a child, a determination by the court that domestic or family violence has occurred raises a rebuttable presumption that it is detrimental to the child and not in the best interest of the child to be placed in sole custody, joint legal custody, or joint physical custody with the perpetrator of family violence.²⁹

The American Bar Association (ABA) passed a resolution in August 1989 that joint custody is inappropriate in cases in which spouse abuse, child abuse, or parental kidnapping is likely to occur.³⁰ In 1994, the ABA published a report to its president suggesting the adoption of statutes creating a presumption against custody to batterers.³¹ In July 2000 the ABA adopted new policy statements with respect to domestic violence and custody, and recommended that states and lawyers take action to provide for the safety of adult and child domestic violence victims during visitation and visitation exchanges.³²

In 1996, the American Psychological Association also recommended that states adopt such statutes:

In matters of custody, preference should be given to the nonviolent parent whenever possible, and unsupervised visitation should not be granted to the perpetrator until an offender-specific treatment program is successfully completed, or the offender proves that he is no longer a threat to the physical and emotional safety of the child and the other parent.³³

Similarly, the Uniform Adoption Act provides for terminating a father's rights if "the respondent has been convicted of a crime of violence or of violating a restraining or protective order, and the facts of the crime or violation and the respondent's behavior indicate that the respondent is unfit to maintain a relationship of

29. MODEL CODE, *supra* note 28, § 410, at 33.

30. A.B.A. HOUSE OF DELEGATES, APPROVED RESOLUTIONS RELATED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (1989); *see also* A.B.A. Model Joint Custody Statute, 15 FAM. L. REV. 1494, 1495 (1989) (requiring courts to consider domestic violence in making joint custody awards).

31. Howard Davidson, THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN: A REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE A.B.A. (1994).

32. Linda D. Elrod & Robert G. Spector, *A Review of the Year in Family Law: Redefining Families, Reforming Custody Jurisdiction, and Refining Support Issues*, 34 FAM. L.Q. 607, 626 (Winter, 2001). For content of new A.B.A. policies, see <http://www.abanet.org> (last visited Oct. 3, 2001).

33. A.B.A., VIOLENCE AND THE FAMILY, 99 (1996).

parent and child with the minor³⁴

1. Social Science Literature

Another reason statutes establishing a presumption against custody to batterers were enacted was the growing body of social science literature showing the often severe and long-lasting effects of domestic violence on children.³⁵ This literature also argued that joint custody was contraindicated when there has been family violence.³⁶

2. Mothers Losing Custody

Furthermore, studies and articles started to show that when fathers in general or batterers in particular fought for custody, they usually won.³⁷ There are also many cases in which mothers initially

34. UNIFORM ADOPTION ACT § 3-504 (1994).

35. ENDING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE: COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO CHILDREN OF BATTERED WOMEN (E. Peled et al., eds., 1995); P.G. JAFFE ET AL., CHILDREN OF BATTERED WOMEN (1990); D.A. Wolfe et al., *Children of Battered Women: The Relation of Child Behavior to Family Violence and Maternal Stress*, 53 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 657 (1985); N.Z. Hilton, *Battered Women's Concerns About their Children Witnessing Wife Assault*, 7 J. INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 77 (1992); J.R. Johnston & L.E.G. Campbell, *Parent-child Relationships in Domestic Violence Families Disputing Custody*, 31 FAM. & CONCILIATION CTS. REV. 282, 282-83 (1993); M. Roy, *Children in the Crossfire*, HEALTH COMM. (1988); P.G. Jaffe et al., *Child Witnesses of Woman Abuse: How Can Schools Respond?*, 14 RESPONSE TO VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN 12 (1992); D. G. Saunders, *Child Custody Decisions in Families Experiencing Wife Abuse*, 39 SOC. WORK 51 (1994).

36. L. Crites & D. Coker, *What Therapists See That Judges May Miss: A Unique Guide to Custody Decisions When Spouse Abuse is Charged*, JUDGES J. 9-13 (Spring, 1988); Germane et al., *supra* note 9; M. D. Pagelow, *Justice for Victims of Spouse Abuse in Divorce and Child Custody Cases*, 8 VIOLENCE & VICTIMS 69 (1993); Pauline Quirion, *Increased Protection for Children from Violent Homes: The Presumption Against Awarding Child Custody to a Batterer*, 16 MASS. FAM. L. J. 67 (1998); Saunders, *supra* note 35, at 56 (citing R. E. Emery and M. M. Wyer, *Divorce Mediation*, 42 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 472 (1987)).

37. Pagelow, *supra* note 36 (citing R. Gelfner & M. Pagelow, *Victims of Spouse Abuse*, in TREATMENT OF FAMILY VIOLENCE: A SOURCEBOOK 81-97 (R. T. Ammerman & M. Hersen, eds.) (1990)); L. A. Marks, *Mandatory Mediation of Family Law and Domestic Violence Cases*, NCADV VOICE, 18-22 (Winter, 1988); M. B. Liss & G. B. Stahly, *Domestic Violence and Child Custody*, in BATTERING AND FAMILY THERAPY: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE 175 (M. Hansen & M. Harway, eds., 1993); J. Zorza, *Protecting the Children: Custody Disputes When One Parent Abuses the Other*, 29 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 1113 (April 1996) (citing R. I. ABRAMS AND J. M. GREANEY, REPORT OF THE GENDER BIAS STUDY OF THE SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT [OF MASSACHUSETTS] 62-63 (1989) that stated fathers won in seventy percent of contested custody cases and noting that this report also cites similar findings from California and the entire nation); M. A. Mason & A. Quirk, *Are Mothers Losing Custody? Read My Lips: Trends*

or eventually lost custody due to their inability to get along with the fathers. In some of these, in which there were no allegations of partner abuse, the court first awarded joint custody, then found after awhile that this was unworkable due to continued conflict between the parents.³⁸

In other cases, there was extensive evidence of partner abuse. The fact that a formerly battered mother and her former batterer are not able to co-parent effectively is not at all surprising. However, it is very unfortunate that many courts are still so unaware of how domestic violence dynamics enter into custody cases. One wonders why the court ever expected people in this situation to suddenly be able to cooperate.

An example of such a case is found in *In re Marriage of Devilbiss*.³⁹ In that case, the evidence included fifteen police reports, testimony by the daughter that the father used to hit the mother, and allegations that he also choked the daughter.⁴⁰ However, the court ignored this evidence in its order changing the joint custody order to "rotating custody."⁴¹ Under this arrangement, the daughter was ordered to live with her mother for seven months each year and with her father for five months.⁴² The court noted that the parents had not been able to cooperate as required by the joint custody order.⁴³ Another example is found in

in Judicial Decision-Making in Custody Disputes—1920, 1960, 1990, and 1995, 31 FAM. L. Q. 215 (1997) (citing a study finding that fathers won in sixty-three percent of contested custody cases, Lisa Genasci, *Increasingly, Working Mothers Lose in Custody Fights*, L.A. TIMES, January 20, 1995, at D8); Mary Lynne Vellinga, *Custody Laws Under Fire: Parents Who Batter Often Allowed to Retain Joint Care*, SACRAMENTO BEE, March 23, 1997, at A1.

38. See, e.g., *In re Marriage of Cobb*, 988 P.2d 272, 273 (Kan. Ct. App. 1999) (court briefly mentions without comment allegations that father abused child, then changed joint custody award to sole custody to father due to parents' inability to co-parent); *Brown v. Brown*, 19 S.W.3d 717, 722-23 (Mo. Ct. App. 2000) (without any allegations of abuse, the court modified the joint custody arrangement to sole custody to the father because of the mother's unwillingness to co-parent and that the father is best suited to make decisions in the best interests of the child); *Thomas v. Thomas*, 991 P.2d 7, 10 (N.M. Ct. App. 1999) (noting no allegations of abuse, the court changed joint custody to sole to father due to parents' inability to co-parent).

39. 719 N.E.2d 375 (Ill. App. Ct. 1999).

40. *Id.* at 378-80.

41. *Id.* at 383.

42. *Id.* at 380 (affirming the trial court's ruling that the daughter live with the father from the first Saturday after the end of the school year to the first Saturday of November).

43. *Id.* at 385.

Canty v. Canty,⁴⁴ in which the trial court modified the joint legal and split physical custody award to sole physical custody with the father, in spite of his admitting that he had committed domestic violence on the mother.⁴⁵ The appellate court upheld this order, noting that the evidence of domestic violence was merely one factor in the best interests analysis.⁴⁶

In all too many cases, batterers are in effect using the family courts to re-victimize their victims.⁴⁷ Instead of preventing this, courts sometimes collude with this behavior by awarding the batterer joint custody, sole custody, or extensive unsupervised visitation. While examining appellate cases decided in states without such a presumption or before the enactment of the presumption is beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that in many such cases judges clearly ignored extensive histories of domestic violence in making custody decisions.⁴⁸

IV. DESCRIPTION OF STATUTES ESTABLISHING PRESUMPTIONS AGAINST CUSTODY TO BATTERERS

A. Overview

In response to the growing body of policy statements, studies, articles and cases, states started to adopt statutes establishing a rebuttable presumption against custody to batterers.⁴⁹ As of January 2001, there were sixteen states plus the District of

44. 874 P.2d 1000 (Ariz. Ct. App. 1994).

45. *Id.* at 1005.

46. Arizona later amended its custody statute to provide that domestic violence created a presumption against custody to the batterer. ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 25-403 (2000).

47. This problem is described at length in Leigh Goodmark, *From Property to Personhood: What the Legal System Should do for Children in Family Violence Cases*, 102 W. VA. L. REV. 237 (1999). See also, Quirion, *supra* note 36, at 67.

48. See cases described in Goodmark, *supra* note 47, at 254-75. See also, NANCY K. D. LEMON, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & CHILDREN: RESOLVING CUSTODY AND VISITATION DISPUTES, FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION FUND, 39-40 (1995). But see *Bruscato v. Bruscato*, 593 So. 2d 838 (La. Ct. App. 1992) (remanding case for more thorough evaluation and retrial where batterer father was awarded sole custody even though rebuttable presumption was not yet in effect).

49. For an argument in favor of the adoption of such a presumption in Massachusetts, see Pauline Quirion et al., *Commentary: Protecting Children Exposed To Domestic Violence In Contested Custody And Visitation Litigation*, 6 B.U. PUB. INT. L.J. 501 (1997). A similar argument in New York is found in Kurtz, *supra* note 6, at 1346.

Columbia which had adopted such statutes.⁵⁰ In the summer of

50. These included Alabama, Arizona, California, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, and South Dakota. In Alabama, there exists a rebuttable presumption that it is detrimental to child and not in best interest of child to be placed in sole custody, joint legal custody, or joint physical custody when court determines that domestic violence has occurred. ALA. CODE § 30-3-131 (1975). In addition, the state has a rebuttable presumption that it is in the best interest of the child to reside with the parent who is not a perpetrator of domestic or family violence. ALA. CODE § 30-3-133 (1975). The state of Arizona makes it a rebuttable presumption that an award of custody to the parent who committed the act of domestic violence is contrary to the child's best interests, if the court determines that a parent has committed an act of domestic violence against the other parent; however, such presumption does not apply if both parents have committed an act of domestic violence. ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 25-403 (2000). California provides that a rebuttable presumption exists against sole or joint physical or legal custody if the court finds that a party perpetrated domestic violence. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044 (West Supp. 2001). The statute allows that this presumption may be rebutted by a preponderance of the evidence. *Id.* The statute identifies factors to overcome the presumption. *Id.* In Delaware, there is a rebuttable presumption that no perpetrator of domestic violence shall be awarded sole or joint custody and a rebuttable presumption that no child shall primarily reside with perpetrator of domestic violence. DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 13 § 705A (1993). This presumption is overcome by a preponderance of the evidence. *Id.* The statute identifies factors needed to overcome presumption. *Id.* Otherwise the presumption may be overcome only if a judicial officer finds extraordinary circumstances that warrant the rejection of the presumption. *Id.* The state of Florida has a rebuttable presumption of detriment to the child and against ordering shared parental responsibility, including visitation, residence of the child, and decisions made regarding the child, if there is evidence that a parent has been convicted of a felony of the third degree or higher involving domestic violence. FLA. STAT. ANN. § 61.13 (West 1997). Hawaii's rebuttable presumption statute provides that it is detrimental to the child and not in the best interest of the child to be placed in sole custody, joint legal custody, or joint physical custody if the court determines that family violence has been committed by a parent. HAW. REV. STAT. ANN. § 571-46 (Michie 1999). In Iowa, rebuttable presumption exists against joint custody if the court finds a history of domestic abuse. IOWA CODE ANN. § 598-41 (West Supp. 2001). This finding, if not rebutted, outweighs any other factor in determining the award of custody. *Id.* Louisiana has a presumption against sole or joint custody if a parent has a history of perpetrating family violence. LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 9:364 (West 2000). The court must find that that one incident of family violence resulted in serious bodily injury or more than one incident of family violence occurred before such a presumption can be applied. *Id.* Such a presumption may be overcome by a preponderance of the evidence. *Id.* This statute also identifies factors to overcome the presumption. *Id.* Massachusetts has a rebuttable presumption that it is not in the best interests of the child to be placed in sole custody, shared legal custody, or shared physical custody with the abusive parent if court finds, by a preponderance of the evidence, that a pattern or serious incident of abuse has occurred, which may be overcome by a preponderance of the evidence that such custody award is in the best interests of the child. MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. chs. 208 § 31A, 209 § 38, 209C § 10 (West Supp. 2001). In Nevada, the statute provides that a rebuttable presumption that

2001, Texas passed legislation strengthening its statute, creating a rebuttable presumption against joint custody, sole custody, or unsupervised visitation in cases of child abuse, child neglect, or

sole or joint custody with the perpetrator of domestic violence is not in the best interests of the child if court determines after an evidentiary hearing and finding by clear and convincing evidence that either parent or any other person seeking custody has engaged in one or more acts of domestic violence. NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. § 125.480 (Michie Supp. 1999). The state also provides that there exists a rebuttable presumption that sole or joint custody of the child by the perpetrator of sexual assault is not in the best interest of the child if the person is convicted of sexual assault and the parties later divorce. NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. § 125C.210 (Michie Supp. 1999). In addition, there exists a rebuttable presumption that sole or joint custody by the parent convicted of first degree murder of the other parent is not in the best interest of the child and also includes a rebuttable presumption that rights to visitation with the child by the parent convicted of first degree murder of the other parent are not in the best interest of the child and must not be granted if custody is not granted. NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. § 125C.220 (Michie Supp. 1999). There is a rebuttable presumption that sole or joint custody by the perpetrator of domestic violence is not in the best interest of the child, if after an evidentiary hearing the court finds by clear and convincing evidence that either parent or any other person seeking custody has engaged in one or more acts of domestic violence against the child, a parent, or any other person residing with the child. NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. § 125C.230 (Michie Supp. 1999). Nevada also provides a rebuttable presumption that custody with the perpetrator of domestic violence is not in the best interests of the child if court determines after an evidentiary hearing and finding by clear and convincing evidence that either parent or any other person seeking custody has engaged in one or more acts of domestic violence. NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. § 432B.157 (Michie 2000). In North Dakota, there is a rebuttable presumption that a parent who has perpetrated domestic violence may not be awarded sole or joint custody if the court finds credible evidence that domestic violence has occurred and there exists one incident of domestic violence which resulted in serious bodily injury or involved the use of a dangerous weapon or there exists a pattern of domestic violence within a reasonable time proximate to the proceeding. N.D. CENT. CODE § 14-09-06.2 (1999). This presumption may be overcome only by clear and convincing evidence that the best interests of the child require that parent's participation as a custodial parent. *Id.* Oklahoma's rebuttable presumption statute provides that it is not in the best interests of the child to have custody, guardianship or unsupervised visitation granted to the abusive person if the occurrence of ongoing domestic abuse is established by clear and convincing evidence. ORLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 43 § 112.2, tit. 10 § 21.1 (West 2001). In Oregon, there exists a rebuttable presumption that it is not in the best interests and welfare of the child to award sole or joint custody to the parent who committed abuse. OR. REV. STAT. § 107.137 (1989). In South Dakota, there is a rebuttable presumption that awarding custody to the abusive parent is not in the best interests of the minor if the person has been convicted of domestic abuse or assault against a person, other than a person related by consanguinity, but not living in the same household. S.D. CODIFIED LAWS § 25-4-45.5 (Michie 1999). In addition, there is a rebuttable presumption that awarding custody or granting visitation to the parent convicted for the death of the other parent, excluding vehicular homicide, is not in the best interests of the minor. S.D. CODIFIED LAWS § 25-4-45.6 (Michie 1999).

partner abuse, including sexual abuse resulting in the birth of the child.⁵¹ Additionally, at this point, three states have adopted presumptions against joint custody in domestic violence cases or considered the perpetration of domestic violence stronger than a factor, but do not actually state a presumption against awarding custody to the abusive parent.⁵²

These twenty states plus the District of Columbia are a subgroup of the forty-eight jurisdictions that had adopted some type of legislation regarding domestic violence as a custody factor by the beginning of 2001.⁵³ The only states without any statute discussing this issue as of that date were Connecticut, Mississippi, and Utah.⁵⁴

The presumption statutes vary greatly, in terms of 1) whether the presumption applies to all types of custody or only to joint custody; 2) how domestic violence is defined, that is what type of evidence is required to trigger the presumption; 3) what evidentiary standard is required to trigger the presumption; 4) what type of evidence is required to rebut the presumption; and 5) what evidentiary standard is required to rebut the presumption. They also vary in terms of what the court is to do if both parents appear to have been abusive, and what standard should be applied if the presumption is found inapplicable.

51. See Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 586 (Vernon) (amending TEX. FAM. CODE ANN. § 153.004 (Vernon 1996)). See also Steve McGonigle, *'Girls' Slayings Inspire Bill: Unsupervised Visits Would Require Judge's Approval*, THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS, May 26, 2001, available at http://www.dallasnews.com/metro/stories/377451_battaglia26me.html (last visited Sept. 7, 2001).

52. These included Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin. In Colorado, if the court makes a finding of fact that domestic violence has occurred, then it shall not be in the best interest of the child to allocate mutual decision-making responsibility over the objection of the other party or the child's representative, unless the court finds that the parties can make shared decisions about their children without physical confrontation and that places the abused party or child in danger. See COLO. REV. STAT. ANN. § 14-10-124 (1.5)(b)(v) (West 1997). In the state of Washington, a parent's residential time with child will be limited if there exists a history of acts of domestic violence or assault/sexual assault "which causes grievous bodily harm or fear of such harm." WASH. REV. CODE ANN. § 26.09.191(2)(a)(ii)-(iii) (West 1997). In Wisconsin, a rebuttable presumption exists that the parents will not be able to cooperate in future decision-making when domestic violence is present. See WIS. STAT. ANN. § 767.24(2)(b)-(c) (West 1993). Pennsylvania also gives great weight to the perpetration of domestic violence or sexual assault by requiring successful completion of a batterer's treatment program if the abuser is convicted of certain crimes. See 23 PA. CONS. STAT. ANN. § 5303 (West 1991).

53. Elrod & Spector, *supra* note 32, at 613-14.

54. *Id.*

B. Presumption Applicable Only to Joint Custody

Some presumption statutes apply only to decisions regarding joint custody. In a few of these states, the presumption against joint custody to the abuser is coupled with a presumption favoring joint custody in the absence of abuse.⁵⁵ The District of Columbia Code provides that there is a rebuttable presumption that joint custody is not in the best interest of the child if the court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that an intra-family offense has occurred.⁵⁶ It also provides for a rebuttable presumption favoring joint custody unless the court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that an intra-family offense has occurred.⁵⁷ Similarly, section 32-717B of the Idaho Code states that there is a presumption that joint custody is not in the best interests of a minor child if the court finds that one of the parents is a habitual perpetrator of domestic violence.⁵⁸ It also contains a presumption that joint custody is in the best interest of the child absent a preponderance of the evidence to the contrary.⁵⁹ This type of provision is not very beneficial for victims of domestic violence, since even if the presumption against joint custody is rebutted through evidence of abuse, the victimized parent must still prove to the court that it is in the best interests of the child to be placed with him or her rather than with the abusive parent.

A particularly problematic statute is found in Minnesota, which contains a similar provision, but applicable only to joint legal custody.⁶⁰ Minnesota Statute section 518.17 includes a rebuttable presumption that joint legal custody is not in the best interests of the child if domestic abuse has occurred between the parents.⁶¹ However, the same code section states that there is also a rebuttable presumption that joint legal custody, if requested by either or both parties, is in the best interests of the child.⁶² Clearly there will be many cases in which these two policies conflict, especially when the abusive parent can trigger the presumption favoring joint legal

55. See, e.g., D.C. CODE ANN. §§ 16-119(a)(5), 16-914(a)(2) (1997); IDAHO CODE § 32-717 B (Michie 1996).

56. D.C. CODE ANN. §§ 16-119(a)(5), 16-914(a)(2) (1997).

57. *Id.*

58. See IDAHO CODE § 32-717 B (5) (Michie 1996).

59. See *id.* § 32-717 B (4).

60. See MINN. STAT. § 518.17, subd. 2(d) (2000).

61. *Id.* The statute does not state what evidence rebuts the presumption. *Id.*

62. *Id.* New Hampshire law provides a similar provision. See N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 458:17(II)(e) (1992) (amended by 2001 N.H. Laws 102).

custody merely by requesting it. Case law demonstrating how courts have resolved this dilemma will be discussed below. On the other hand, the Minnesota statute does state that if the court awards joint custody, it must make detailed findings of fact on each of the best interest standards.⁶³

C. *Presumption Applicable to Sole or Joint Custody*

Most of the presumption states have no contrary presumption favoring joint custody in the absence of domestic violence or when requested by a parent. Statutes stating that the presumption applies to sole or joint custody to a perpetrator are in effect in Alabama, Arizona, California, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, and South Dakota.⁶⁴

D. *What Triggers the Presumption?*

Statutes vary in terms in how they define domestic violence and what standard of proof is required in order to trigger the presumption against awarding custody to an abuser. Several states define domestic violence by cross-referencing other statutes, such as a state's restraining order statute.⁶⁵ It is important to take note whether these statutes include threats of physical harm, or only actual physical harm. Also note that the statutes tend to leave out other types of batterer behavior which are intended to dominate and control victims, such as emotional abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, and property abuse, all of which may be intended to dominate and control the victim.⁶⁶

In terms of standards of proof, in some states, the statute merely provides that there must be a "finding of domestic violence,"⁶⁷ or "credible evidence of domestic violence."⁶⁸ A few statutes specify that the standard will be the lowest possible, the

63. MINN. STAT. § 518.17 (2000).

64. For citations to the rebuttable presumption statutes, see *supra* note 51.

65. See, e.g., CAL. FAM. CODE § 3041 (West Supp. 2001); DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 13 § 705A (1999); MINN. STAT. § 518.17 (2000); WIS. STAT. ANN. § 767.24 (West 1993).

66. Amy Pincolini, *A Tool for Safety: Child Custody Presumptions*, 5 SYNERGY 6, 7 (2000) (published by Nat. Council of Juv. & Fam. Ct. Judges, Reno, NV).

67. See, e.g., LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 9:364 (West 2000); MINN. STAT. § 518.17 (2000).

68. See, e.g., N. D. CENT. CODE § 14-09-06.2 (1)(j) (West Supp. 2001).

preponderance of the evidence.⁶⁹ Other states require the standard of "clear and convincing evidence" of domestic violence.⁷⁰ Wisconsin requires evidence of a crime of inter-spousal battery or abuse, as defined in the statute providing for civil protective orders.⁷¹ However, actual conviction is not required in this state before the presumption is triggered.

Some states require that the domestic violence have occurred more than once. For example, Idaho requires that the abuser be a "habitual perpetrator" before the presumption is triggered.⁷² Iowa requires "a history of domestic abuse,"⁷³ and Oklahoma requires "ongoing domestic abuse."⁷⁴ In several states, there must be either a pattern or history of abuse, or at least one serious incident before the presumption is triggered. These include Louisiana, Massachusetts, and North Dakota.⁷⁵

The highest standards of proof are found in states requiring that the abuser first be convicted of a domestic violence crime.⁷⁶ As stated above, Nevada's presumption can be triggered by clear and convincing evidence of domestic violence; alternatively, it can be triggered by a conviction of sexual assault or first-degree murder of the other parent.⁷⁷

Setting the standard for triggering the presumption high will

69. See, e.g., CAL. FAM. CODE § 3041 (West Supp. 2001); D.C. CODE ANN. §§ 16-911, 16-914 (1997); MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. chs. 208, § 31A, 209, § 38, 209C § 10 (West Supp. 2001).

70. See NEV. REV. STAT. § 125.480(5) (1999); OKLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 43, § 112.2 (West 2001); 2001 Okla. Sess. Laws 141 (amending OKLA. STAT. tit. 10, § 21.1 (2000)).

71. WIS. STAT. ANN. §§ 767.24, 813.12 (West 1993).

72. IDAHO CODE § 32-717B(5) (Michie 2000).

73. IOWA CODE ANN. § 598-41 (West Supp. 2001).

74. OKLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 43, § 112.2 (West 2001); 2001 Okla. Sess. Laws 141.

75. Louisiana requires more than one incident or a finding that one incident of family violence resulted in serious bodily injury. LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 9:364(A) (West 2000). Massachusetts requires either a pattern or serious incident of abuse. MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. chs. 208, § 31A, 209, § 38, 209C § 10 (West Supp. 2001). North Dakota requires either one incident resulting in serious bodily injury or involving the use of a dangerous weapon, or a pattern of domestic violence within a reasonable time proximate to the proceeding. N. D. CENT. CODE § 14-09-06.2(i)(j) (1999).

76. Florida requires a conviction for a third degree felony or higher involving domestic violence. 2001 Fla. Laws ch. 2001-2 (amending FLA. STAT. ANN. § 61.13 (West 1997)). South Dakota requires a conviction of domestic abuse or assault, or homicide of the other parent. S.D. CODIFIED LAWS §§ 25-4-45.5, 25-4-45.6 (Michie 1999).

77. NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. §§ 125.480, 125C.210, 125C.220, 125C.230 (Michie Supp. 1999).

of course exclude many domestic violence cases, in which there has been only one incident of abuse, and no conviction. In many relationships, one incident of abuse can be sufficient to dominate and control the victim throughout the relationship. This can occur when the batterer uses the incident to warn and remind the victim of what can happen.⁷⁸ Of course, children who are aware of the abuse by one parent toward the other can also be traumatized by one incident.⁷⁹

However, in some cases the high standards enumerated here were narrowly drafted to account for the possibility that some abused parents might use violence in self-defense or to protect children, in which case the presumption was not designed to apply.⁸⁰ As will be seen in the discussion in Part IV, in states with lower standards for triggering the presumption, such actions by the abused parent may be seen as nullifying the presumption. In drafting the language of such statutes, legislators and advocates must always engage in balancing tests, weighing the benefits of a lower standard for triggering the presumption against the danger to victims who fight back.

E. Cases In Which Both Parents Have Engaged in Domestic Violence

Some of the presumption statutes address situations in which both parents appear to have engaged in abuse. In at least one state, Louisiana, the statute contains a "primary aggressor"⁸¹ provision. This directs the court to determine which of the parents is the main or dominant aggressor, and to ascertain whether one of the parents was actually acting to defend herself or himself or another person, such as the child.⁸² The North Dakota Supreme Court has developed such a concept through its decisions interpreting the presumption.⁸³ In other states, the statute provides

78. DONALD G. DUTTON AND SUSAN K. GOLANT, *THE BATTERER: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE* 13, 23, 24 (1995).

79. Janis Wolak & David Finkelhor, *Children Exposed to Partner Violence in PARTNER VIOLENCE: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF TWENTY YEARS OF RESEARCH* 90 (Janis L. Jasinski & Linda M. Williams eds., 1998).

80. The Family Violence Project, *supra* note 18, at 206.

81. This term was changed to "dominant aggressor" in CAL. PENAL CODE § 836, effective January 2001. The legislative history indicates that this change was made in order to clarify that the focus should be on which party dominates the other, rather than on who "started the fight."

82. *See*, LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 9:362(3) (West 2000).

83. *See, e.g.*, *Krank v. Krank*, 529 N.W.2d 844, 848 (N.D. 1995).

that if both parents are found to have committed domestic violence, the presumption against the abuser does not apply.⁸⁴

Given the likelihood that both parents will be found to be abusers in states with low standards for triggering the presumption, it would probably be advisable to amend these statutes to provide for a primary or dominant aggressor analysis. This is similar to the analysis which law enforcement uses in some states when determining which party to arrest.⁸⁵

F. Rebutting the Presumption

The statutes also vary in terms of what is necessary in order to rebut the presumption. Most states do not specify what is required for rebuttal, which does not give courts any guidance. A few states specify the evidentiary standard required, but do not list actual factors for consideration, which also leaves the court having to create its own standards from case to case.⁸⁶

Other states list specific factors that the court must consider in finding that the presumption has been rebutted.⁸⁷ For example, California states that the court must consider 1) whether the perpetrator has shown that it is in the best interest of the child to be in the custody of that parent; 2) successful completion of a batterer's program; 3) successful completion of a program for alcohol or drug abuse if found appropriate by the court; 4) compliance with court orders and with probation and parole conditions, if applicable; and 5) whether there has been any further violence.⁸⁸ The Arizona⁸⁹ and Delaware factors are virtually identical to this.⁹⁰ Louisiana requires the successful completion of a treatment program for batterers, refraining from abuse of alcohol

84. See, e.g., ARIZ. REV. STAT. ANN. § 25-403(N) (2000) (amended by 2001 Ariz. Sess. Laws 14); CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044(c) (West Supp. 2001).

85. See, e.g., CAL. PENAL CODE § 836 (West Supp. 2001). However, see the discussion in Part IV regarding the controversy surrounding whether to include such a provision.

86. For example, in Massachusetts the court must find by preponderance of evidence that custody to abuser is in best interests of child. MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. chs. 208 § 31A, 209 § 38, 209C § 10 (1998). In North Dakota, the presumption may be overcome only by clear and convincing evidence that the best interests of the child require that parent's participation as custodial parent. N.D. CENT. CODE § 14-09-06.2(1)(j) (1999).

87. These states include: Arizona, California, Delaware, and Louisiana.

88. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044(b) (West Supp. 2001).

89. ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 25-403 (2000) (amended by 2001 Ariz. Sess. Laws 14).

90. DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 13, § 705A (1999).

or illegal drugs, and demonstrating that the absence or incapacity of the abused parent or other circumstances are such that custody granted to the perpetrator is in the best interests of the child.⁹¹ Its statute also directs the court to give sole custody to the parent who is least likely to continue perpetration of family violence.⁹²

As noted previously, Wisconsin has a presumption only against joint legal custody in domestic violence cases.⁹³ In order to rebut this, there must be clear and convincing evidence that the perpetrator will not interfere with the abused party's ability to cooperate in future decision-making.⁹⁴

G. If the Presumption is Found Inapplicable or Rebutted

If the presumption is found inapplicable or rebutted, then the parties may still have the benefit of statutes requiring that domestic violence be considered in custody decisions.⁹⁵ Legislatures are strongly encouraged to enact such statutes, so that the issue of domestic violence does not disappear from the custody decision. In the absence of such statutes, the court applies the general best interest of the child standard and the parties are on a level playing field. This may be very problematic for the battered parent, who then still has to convince the court that the child has been adversely affected by the abuse, or that there is ongoing danger to the victim parent or child.

H. Case Study: Development of the Presumption in California

While California was not the first state to adopt a rebuttable presumption statute, the history of its legislation is a useful example of a "step by step" approach. Like many other states, California attempted several different versions of its custody statutes before passing a statute establishing a presumption against custody to batterers.

California was the fifteenth state to adopt such a presumption statute, which took effect January 2000.⁹⁶ This legislation, A.B.

91. LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 9:364(A) (West 2000).

92. *Id.* § 9:364(B).

93. *See supra* note 52.

94. WIS. STAT. ANN. § 767.24 (West 1993).

95. *See, e.g.*, CAL. FAM. CODE § 3011 (West Supp. 2001).

96. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044 (West 2000) (added by Stats. 1999, c. 445 (A.B. 840), §1).

840,⁹⁷ was carried by Speaker Pro Tem Sheila Kuehl, a long-time advocate for victims of domestic violence.⁹⁸ The California Alliance Against Domestic Violence (C.A.A.D.V.) sponsored the bill.⁹⁹ Supporters included medical groups, law enforcement, prosecutors, Boards of Supervisors, many women's groups, the California State PTA, and numerous domestic violence organizations.¹⁰⁰ Opposition included the California Judges Association, the Judicial Council, the Family Law Section of the State Bar, and the Coalition of Parent Support, a father's rights group.¹⁰¹ This legislation was based on the Model Code.¹⁰² Kuehl had been a member of the national task force which wrote that Code.

A.B. 840 was preceded by two bills, both of which were carried by Assemblywoman Kuehl. A.B. 800, introduced in 1996, died in the Senate Judiciary Committee, and A.B. 200, introduced in 1997, was amended in that same committee to remove the rebuttable presumption language. A.B. 200, amending Family Code sections 3011 and 3020, was effective January 1998.¹⁰³ Among other provisions, these sections now mandate that judges prioritize the child's health, safety, and welfare over the policy favoring frequent and continuing contact with each parent after separation.¹⁰⁴ They also require judges to make written findings of fact or statements on the record as to why they are awarding custody to an alleged perpetrator of domestic violence or child abuse, or to an alleged substance abuser.¹⁰⁵

97. A.B. 840/ Assembly Bill 840, 1999 Legs. (Cal. 1999).

98. Syrus Devers, AB 840 Assembly Bill, Bill Analysis 3, at http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/9900/bill/asm/ab_08010850/ab_840_cfa_19990422_080416_asm_comm.html (April 20, 1999). See also, <http://democrats.sen.ca.gov/senator/kuehl> (describing Senator Kuehl's achievements). Assemblywoman Sheila Kuehl is serving her first term in the California Senate after serving six years in the State Assembly. *Id.* She was formerly the Speaker Pro Tempore of the Assembly (from 1997-98). *Id.* Kuehl is also a former Professor of Law at Loyola, U.C.L.A. and U.S.C. Schoc's of Law and co-founder of the California Women's Law Center. *Id.*

99. Devers, *supra* note 98, at 3.

100. *Id.* at 8-9.

101. See *id.* at 9.

102. See *id.* at 3. See also, *supra* note 27 and accompanying text (describing the ABA's Model Code).

103. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3011 (amended by stats. 1997, c.899 (A.B. 200), §2); CAL. FAM. CODE § 3020 (amended by Stats. 1997, c. 849 (A.B. 200), § 3).

104. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3020(c) (West Supp. 2001).

105. *Id.* See also, Marlene Rapkin, *The Impact of Domestic Violence on Child Custody Decisions*, 19 J. JUV. L. 404 (1998) (describing the legislative history of A.B. 200 and

A.B. 840 created a new code section, Family Code section 3044.¹⁰⁶ Subdivision (a) describes how a victim of domestic violence raises the presumption.¹⁰⁷ There are several limitations. First, the incident must have occurred within the last five years.¹⁰⁸ Second, the presumption is triggered only by incidents in which the victim was the other person seeking custody of the child, the child, or the child's siblings.¹⁰⁹ Third, the court must make a finding that domestic violence occurred, so that allegations alone do not trigger the presumption.¹¹⁰ If the court makes such a finding, the burden of proof then shifts to the perpetrator to prove why it is in the best interests of the child to be in his or her custody.¹¹¹ All types of custody are specifically included, whether legal or physical, sole or joint.¹¹² However, the new code section does not address visitation.¹¹³

Subdivision (b) of Family Code section 3044 describes how the perpetrator can rebut the presumption, clarifying that the standard of proof is a preponderance of the evidence, and listing several factors that the court is directed to consider in making this determination.¹¹⁴ According to subdivision (c) the presumption does not apply if both parents are found to have perpetrated domestic violence.¹¹⁵ This subdivision had originally provided for a "primary aggressor" analysis, cross-referencing the California Penal

arguing that it did not go far enough, that is that California needed to enact a presumption against custody to batterers).

106. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044 (West Supp. 2001). A particularly useful document in terms of legislative history of this code section was written by Syrus Devers, legislative counsel for the California Assembly Judiciary Committee, when the bill was heard in that committee April 22, 1999. See Devers, *supra* note 98.

107. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044(a) (West Supp. 2001) (stating "[u]pon a finding by the court that a party seeking custody of a child has perpetrated domestic violence against the other party seeking custody of the child or against the child or the child's sibling within the previous five years, there is a rebuttable presumption that an award of sole or joint physical or legal custody of a child to the person who has perpetrated the domestic violence is detrimental the best interest of the child.>").

108. *Id.*

109. *Id.*

110. *Id.*

111. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044(b)(1) (West Supp. 2001).

112. *Id.* § 3044(a).

113. *Id.*

114. *Id.* § 3044(b)(1)-(6).

115. *Id.* § 3044(e) (stating that "[i]n most cases in which both parents are perpetrators of domestic violence, this presumption shall not be applicable.>").

Code's definition of that term,¹¹⁶ but was amended in the Senate Judiciary Committee to delete that provision. Subdivision (d) defines domestic violence, using the same standard as is used in Family Code section 6320 for obtaining a Domestic Violence Restraining Order.¹¹⁷

I. *Effects of Presumption Statutes*

1. *Overview*

How are these statutes working? Are they accomplishing the objectives of the legislators who authored them and the groups who supported them? Is implementation uniform or uneven? Do presumptions against custody to batterers mean that family courts now are giving domestic violence the weight it deserves? Is there a backlash in some jurisdictions, and if so, what does it look like? In attempting to answer these questions, this section will look at appellate cases,¹¹⁸ articles by commentators, surveys, and anecdotal comments from advocates, attorneys, judges, and academics in the presumption jurisdictions.

Appellate cases from the jurisdictions with such a presumption indicate that in general it appears to be useful.¹¹⁹ However, there

116. See CAL. PENAL CODE § 863 (e)(3) (West 2001) (defining the term "primary aggressor"). Section 836 also states the factors that a police officer should consider in identifying the primary aggressor, including "the intent of the law to protect victims of domestic violence from continuing abuse" and "the history of domestic violence between the persons involved." *Id.*

117. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044(d) (West Supp. 2001) (stating that a person has "perpetrated domestic violence" for the purposes of section 3044 "when he or she is found by the court to have intentionally or recklessly caused or attempted to cause bodily injury, or sexual assault or to have placed a person in reasonable apprehension of imminent serious bodily injury to that person . . . for which a court may issue an ex parte order pursuant to section 1320.>").

118. See generally Jack M. Dagleish, Annotation, *Construction and Effect of Statutes Mandating Consideration of, or Creating Presumptions Regarding, Domestic Violence in Awarding Custody of Children*, 51 A.L.R.5th 241 (1997) (Supp. Sept. 2000).

119. Cases decided in and anecdotal reports from the states that give domestic violence great weight but do not have an actual rebuttable presumption against awarding custody to a perpetrator will not be included here, as they are beyond the scope of this article. See, e.g., *Bartholf v. Bartholf*, 619 N.W.2d 308 (Wis. Ct. App. 2000). Anna Farber Conrad, Criminal Justice Advocacy Director of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence, stated that Colorado judges often do not see any correlation between partner abuse and custody issues, and may not allow domestic violence experts to testify at custody trials. E-mail from Anna Farber Conrad, Criminal Justice Advocacy Director of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence to author, Professor of Law, University of California at

are some problems with implementation found in the appellate cases. These include a lack of guidance for judges as to what factors should be considered in determining whether the presumption has been raised or overcome.

The jurisdictions will be discussed in roughly the order in which they adopted the rebuttable presumption, with the most experienced jurisdictions first, followed by those which have moderate experience with this statute, and finishing with jurisdictions where the presumption is very new. Looking at the jurisdictions in rough chronological order is useful in determining whether the initial problems presented by the enactment of such statutes, if any, are eventually resolved over time.

2. *Jurisdictions With Many Years Experience Applying the Presumption*

a. *North Dakota*

North Dakota has by far the most reported appellate decisions applying the rebuttable presumption, having enacted its first such statute in 1991.¹²⁰ Notably, the statute has been amended several times in response to some of these decisions.¹²¹ While the North Dakota Supreme Court has had to restate the basic rules many times (for example, that the trial courts must make findings as to whether domestic violence occurred), it appears that the statute is effective in ensuring that domestic violence is taken seriously in custody decisions.

The first North Dakota case decided under the new presumption was *Schestler v. Schestler*.¹²² In this case, the wife's evidence of domestic violence by the husband was found to have triggered the presumption.¹²³ However, the court then held that

Berkeley (June 18, 2001). See also *Caven v. Caven*, 966 P.2d 1247 (Wash. 1998) (relying on the plain language of the statute to conclude that the father's history of domestic violence restricted the trial court's discretion in determining whether the parents should mutually make decisions about the children).

120. North Dakota, like several other less populous states, has no intermediate appellate court, so whenever a trial court decision is appealed, it is heard by the state supreme court.

121. See Kathleen B. Garner, *Infants, Parent and Child: Applying the Rebuttable Presumption Against Awarding Custody to Perpetrators of Domestic Violence*, Heck v. Reed, 529 N.W.2d 155 (N.D. 1995), 72 N.D. L. REV. 155 (1996).

122. 486 N.W.2d 509 (N.D. 1992).

123. *Id.* at 511-12.

REBUTTABLE CUSTODY PRESUMPTIONS IN MICHIGAN: BEYOND THE BEST INTEREST FACTORS IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

By Lynelle Morgan, J.D.

Two conflicting bills that would amend the Child Custody Act of 1970, MCLA 722.21 *et. seq.*, are currently pending before the Michigan Legislature. HB 4546 would, upon a showing of a history of domestic violence, create a presumption against awarding custody to the perpetrator of domestic violence. HB 4664 would require trial courts to begin with a presumption of joint custody between parent/parties in all divorce actions involving minor children. Under both bills, courts would be required to treat custody disputes differently than they are currently treated. Each presumption would be applied before application of the 12 best interest factors. If a triggered presumption were not successfully rebutted, the best interest factors would not apply, and custody would be determined solely by application of the respective presumption. This article discusses each presumption, and their probable effects on cases involving domestic violence.

HOUSE BILL 4546 – PRESUMPTION AGAINST AWARDED CUSTODY TO A PERPETRATOR OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

How it Works

House Bill 4546 provides a civil remedy for survivors of domestic violence by creating a rebuttable presumption against awarding custody to a perpetrator of domestic violence. Under the bill, a court must treat a custody dispute where there is domestic violence differently from other cases. If a victim demonstrates by clear and convincing evidence that a history of domestic violence exists in the relationship, the presumption against awarding custody (sole or joint, physical or legal) to the other party is raised. The other party may present evidence to rebut the presumption, but must also do so by clear and convincing evidence. If the presumption is not successfully rebutted, sole legal and physical custody is awarded to the non-violent parent. If the other party is successful in rebutting the presumption, the court then applies the 12 best interest factors under the Child Custody Act.

Why It Was Introduced

The Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (MCADSV) garnered support from key Senators and Representatives in the Michigan Legislature to introduce HB 4546. The motivation in sponsoring the bill was to bring civil and family law reforms in Michigan in line with the many criminal justice reforms that have been passed over the past ten years to protect victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence advocates know that parent-survivors are almost always willing to trade every other remedy – including criminal penalties, property settlements, and support issues – for control and safety with respect to custody and parenting time issues. Indeed, for most battered women, the greatest source of stress in their lives is the fear of losing their children.¹ Furthermore, custody, parenting time and child support are often arenas that batterers will use to further victimize and manipulate the victim and the children.

The substance of HB 4546 has been expressly approved by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges through its *Model Code on Domestic and Family Violence* (Model Code). Chapter Four, section 401 of the Model Code recommends that states pass the following language with regard to presumptions concerning custody:

in every proceeding where there is at issue a dispute as to the custody of a child, a determination by the court that domestic or family violence has occurred raises a rebuttable presumption that it is detrimental to the child and not in the best interests of the

¹ Crites, Laura and Coker, Donna, *What Therapist's See That Judges May Miss: a Unique Guide to Custody Decisions When Spouse Abuse is Charged*, THE JUDGE'S JOURNAL (spring, 1988), p. 14.

child to be placed in sole custody, joint legal custody, or joint physical custody with the perpetrator of family violence.²

Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have already enacted laws based in some part on the rebuttable presumption found in the model code.³ The NCJFCJ justifies the recommendation in its comment to section 401:

support for the presumptions incorporated in this section, that domestic violence is detrimental to the child and that it is contrary to the child's best interest to be placed in sole or joint custody with the perpetrator is *extensive* (emphasis supplied).⁴

Why the Law Should Presume that Batterers Don't Make Good Custodial Parents

A 1994 report from several special sections of the American Bar Association, to the President of the ABA, entitled "the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children," states:

anyone who has committed several or repetitive incidents of abuse to an intimate partner is presumptively not a fit sole or joint custodian for children. Where there is proof of abuse, batterers should be presumed by law to be unfit custodians for their children.⁵

The report continues by delineating three characteristics of such "unfit custodians." First, the abuser has ignored the child's interests by harming the child's other parent. Second, the pattern of control and domination common to abusers often continues after the physical separation of the abuser and victim. Third, abusers are highly likely to use children in their care, or attempt to gain custody of the children, as a means of controlling their former spouse or partner.⁶

The last characteristic, the question of *why* an abuser is seeking custody, is an important consideration in assessing the assailant's fitness for custody. A batterer who has been the secondary parent frequently seeks custody of the children for two reasons: to punish his spouse for leaving and to continue to control her and maintain contact with her through the children.⁷ Abusers also may have difficulty providing care and nurturing to children, and are frequently distant or uneasy parents.⁸

There is also substantial evidence regarding the negative effects that domestic violence has on children. Many studies show that witnessing violence between ones parents or caretakers is a more consistent predictor of future violence than being the victim of child abuse.⁹ Furthermore, the abuser's violence has been shown to cause a variety of psychological problems for children, similar to those experienced by children who have themselves been abused: fear, somatic complaints, school phobias, enuresis, and insomnia. Boys as young as two have showed fierce aggressiveness and boys continue to become aggressive and disruptive as they get older. Girls tend to withdraw, and to become passive and anxious.¹⁰

² Section 401 of the *Model Code on Domestic and Family Violence*, NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES (1994).

³ *State Legislation: Rebuttable Presumptions Against Awarding Custody to the Perpetrator of Domestic or Family Violence, Found in Custody or Protection Order Statutes*, NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES - FAMILY VIOLENCE DEPARTMENT (October 2000).

⁴ Commentary to Section 401 of the *Model Code*. *supra* note 2.

⁵ Davidson, Howard *The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Report to the President of the American Bar Association* (1994).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Crites & Coker, *supra* note 1 at 12.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

Why Factor K is not Enough

The Child Custody Act of 1970 sets forth twelve factors that a court is to consider in determining the "best interests of the child" for purposes of a child custody dispute. Factor (k), added in 1993, requires the court to consider domestic violence, regardless of whether the violence was directed against or witnessed by the child.¹¹ Critics of HB 4546 have suggested that, because Michigan Courts are already required to consider domestic violence as *one factor* in making custody determinations, the *presumption* of HB 4546 is unnecessary. However, HB 4546 would provide additional, necessary protections for children and survivors.

To begin, the very fact that domestic violence is one of twelve factors that the court must consider is problematic. The statute emphasizes no one factor over any other, and case law suggests that, although trial courts must make findings of fact as to each of the twelve factors, they are not required to attribute special weight to any factor, or even to weigh the findings as to any given factor into their decision.¹² Additionally, although judges theoretically have discretion to make a custody determination based on their findings as to only one or two factors, family law attorneys report anecdotally that this is rarely the case. Judges are therefore very unlikely, under current Michigan law, to base a custody determination wholly or in large part on the finding that one party has a history of domestic violence against the other party.

The failure of current law to emphasize domestic violence over the other factors in this way defies common sense. Most parents at some point find themselves in a position to seek childcare for their children. One can imagine a scenario where a parent facing this task had several pieces (for example, 12) of information about a prospective childcare provider. Regardless of how positive some of the information might be (e.g. early childhood education degree, 25 years of experience, beautiful home-like setting) most, if not all, parents would not give the slightest consideration to a provider with a demonstrated history of violence. Outside of the context of custody disputes, it is simply not considered wise or safe to place children with violent caregivers.

Because factor (k) is not given any special weight under the Child Custody Act, there is always the possibility that judges will not afford it enough consideration. In fact, the recently published *Report and Recommendations by the Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Task Force*, chaired by Lt. Governor Dick Posthumus, recognizes this risk in its finding that, "in certain cases, there is insufficient weight applied to domestic violence as one of the child custody factors."¹³

A recent unpublished opinion from the Court of Appeals underscores this same concern. In *Brian West v Lauri Smallman*, no. 223163, the Michigan Court of Appeals affirmed the award of custody to the plaintiff-father in spite of its finding that there was significant evidence of domestic violence perpetrated by the father against the defendant-mother. At trial, the lower court failed to specifically make a finding on factor k, and erroneously insinuated that factor k would favor the plaintiff-father had it been specifically considered. The Court of Appeals noted the trial court's dual error in failing to make the finding, and in failing to make the finding in the mother-defendant's favor. The evidence of domestic violence was alarming, including: plaintiff discharging a rifle into a mattress upon which defendant laid; plaintiff destroying items in the home; plaintiff punching defendant with a closed fist; plaintiff throwing things at defendant and abusing animals. Nonetheless, the Court of Appeals held that the trial court's ultimate decision to grant plaintiff custody, *considering all of the factors as a whole*, was not a palpable abuse of discretion.¹⁴ This case demonstrates clearly why factor k may not be enough, and how the rebuttable presumption of HB 4546 could significantly change the outcome of a case. In *West v*

¹¹ MCLA 722.23(k), MSA 25.312(3)[k]

¹² See *Fletcher v Fletcher*, 229 Mich App 19, 581 NW2d 11 (1998).

¹³ Posthumus, Lt. Governor Dick (Chair), *Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Task Force Report and Recommendations* (2001), p. 12.

¹⁴ *Brian West v Lauri Smallman and Judy Wozniak*, Michigan Court of Appeals No. 223163, (LC No. 92-204605-DC), Wayne Circuit Court, Unpublished Opinion of June 1, 2001.

Smallman, the Court of Appeals apparently had no trouble finding a history of domestic abuse by the plaintiff-father. Under HB 4546 that finding would have triggered the presumption against awarding custody to the perpetrator and, unless the presumption were successfully rebutted, the best interest factors would not have been considered and weighed in the fashion that they were.

Application of the best interest factors may also inadvertently favor batterers and punish victims. Several of the factors arguably disfavor survivors of domestic violence:

Factor (c) relates to economics – the capacity of each party to provide food, clothing, medical care and other material needs to a child.¹⁵ A common element of a domestic violence relationship is for the perpetrator to control the finances of their partner, by prohibiting her from working, alienating her from other resources, and controlling the parties' joint monies. Therefore, a woman who has recently left a violent relationship may continue to struggle financially, and a perpetrator may appear to be a more stable provider.

Factor (d) relates specifically to the stability of the child's environment.¹⁶ Because domestic violence survivors are in the midst of crisis during most child custody disputes, most aspects of their lives are not stable. Many are forced to leave their homes, stay temporarily with friends or relatives, or even to seek refuge in a domestic violence shelter. Meanwhile, the perpetrator is often free to continue living in the children's previous home environment, giving him a possible preference under this factor.

Factor (g), which relates to the mental and physical health of the parties involved,¹⁷ may also favor batterers. Drug or alcohol abuse, depression and anxiety may plague the battered woman. When such is the case, she may be considered "troubled", "stressed-out" and/or incapable of appropriate parenting. Batterers often use these sequelae of domestic violence, created by the batterer himself, to label the victim as "mentally ill" or "crazy." Further, although a battered woman demonstrates strength when she decides to end a violent marriage, she may appear in court as unstable, nervous or inarticulate – a result of her ordeal. The batterer, on the other hand, may appear in command of himself, calm, well spoken and so forth.¹⁸

Factor (j), the so-called "friendly parent provision", provides perhaps the worst prejudice against a domestic violence survivor. This provision favors the parent who is willing and able to facilitate and encourage a close and continuing parent-child relationship between the child and the other parent.¹⁹ Abusers often appear in court to be the "friendly parent". A victim often wants to limit her and the children's contact with the batterer, out of concern for her children's and her own safety. This concern may appear to court mediators, evaluators and judges as hostility toward the batterer, when in fact she may be voicing valid concerns.²⁰ This factor is particularly troublesome where, as in Michigan, there is a statutory presumption that it is in the best interests of a child for the child to have a strong relationship with both of his or her parents.²¹ Judges face the difficult task of balancing the "strong relationship" presumption (overcome only by clear and convincing evidence on the record) with a statute that merely lists domestic violence as one factor in a best interest analysis.

Factor k, the domestic violence factor,²² may itself weigh against domestic violence survivors. There are times when, after a long period of being victimized, manipulated and controlled, a

¹⁵ MCLA 722.23(c), MSA 25.312(3)[c].

¹⁶ MCLA 722.23(d), MSA 25.312(3)[d].

¹⁷ MCLA 722.23 (g), MSA 25.312(3)[g].

¹⁸ Crites & Coker, *supra*, note 1 at 12.

¹⁹ MCLA 722.23(j), MSA 25.312(3)[j].

²⁰ *State Statutes and Case Law: Custody Law Overview*, RESOLVING CUSTODY AND VISITATION DISPUTES, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (1995), p. 45.

²¹ MCLA 722.27a(1), MSA 25.312(7a)[1].

²² MCLA 722.23(k), MSA 25.312(3)[k].

survivor will strike back physically against a batterer. Many times this is done in self-defense. Nevertheless, courts may consider acts of violence by both equally. To do so is troublesome:

Those who equate any violence by her with his, fails to consider who initiated the violence, the different impact in terms of fear and injuries which distinguish the violence, and also the likelihood that her violence stems from attempts to defend herself or fight back. This is not to justify her violence, but simply to distinguish it from his.²³

HB 4546 confronts this problem directly. Under the bill, if the court finds that each party has a history of domestic violence, it is directed to apply the presumption in favor of the party that is least likely to commit acts of domestic violence in the future. Thus, the victim who retaliates in a single incident, or who strikes out in self-defense, should not be punished with respect to the custody determination.

Rebutting the Presumption

Once a presumption is triggered under HB 4546, it may only be rebutted by a showing of clear and convincing evidence that it is in the best interest of a child for the perpetrator of domestic violence to be awarded custody. Things that a court may consider might include whether the perpetrator has successfully completed a batterer's treatment program; a showing by the batterer that he is abstaining from drugs and/or alcohol; or a showing that no further domestic violence has occurred.

If the perpetrator of domestic violence rebuts the presumption against awarding him custody, then the parties are back on a level playing field and the custody determination will be made pursuant to the 12 best interest factors. Even if a party fails to rebut the presumption, the proposed bill does nothing to limit the party's statutory right to parenting time.

HB 4664 – PRESUMPTION OF AWARDING JOINT CUSTODY IN ALL PARENT -TO - PARENT CHILD CUSTODY DISPUTES

How the Bill Works

HB 4664 would change Michigan Law by requiring judges to start with a presumption that it is in the child's best interests for the parents in a child custody case to be awarded both joint legal and joint physical custody. Under the proposed law, if a parent attempts to rebut the presumption of joint legal and joint physical custody, the court shall presume that each of the best interest factors weights evenly for both parents unless proven otherwise by clear and convincing evidence. Thus, the law would place a heightened standard of proof to findings on the best interest factors. It would also place a special emphasis on the "friendly-parent" provision (factor j), by allowing the court to consider awarding sole legal and physical custody to the party who is more inclined to be willing to cooperate with the other party in terms of parenting decisions and material issues affecting the child's welfare.

Under current Michigan law, in custody disputes between parents, the trial court is required to advise the parents of joint custody and, at the request of either parent, to consider an award of joint custody. Under these circumstances the court must state on the record the reasons for granting or denying a request. Rather than applying a presumption of joint custody, however, the court is required to determine whether joint custody is in the best interest of the child by considering the statutory factors, as well as whether the parents will be able to cooperate and generally agree concerning important decisions affecting the welfare of the child.²⁴

²³ Crites & Coker, *supra* note 1, at 14.

²⁴ MCLA 722.26a(1), MSA 25.312(6a)[1].

Concerns About The Bill

There are several areas for concern regarding proposed HB 4664. Foremost, joint custody is not necessarily reflective of the parental arrangement prior to a divorce and, in fact, there are times that parties do not want a joint custody arrangement.²⁵ As a result of these and other factors, there are times when joint custody is not in the best interest of the child. Particularly in relationships involving domestic violence, one parent may use a custody award to manipulate and control the other parent and their relationship with their child.

A presumption of joint custody would also create a particular burden to parents in light of the recently enacted "100-Mile Rule" (a statutory requirement that all custody orders contain a provision prohibiting a parent from moving a child's residence more than 100 miles (intrastate) without prior consent of the other party or permission of the court).²⁶ The "100 Mile Rule" does not apply in cases where one parent is granted sole legal and physical custody.²⁷

Particularly troubling is that the bill does not contain an exception for cases involving domestic violence. Joint custody (either physical or legal) requires an ability on the part of the parents to work cooperatively and equitably in meeting the needs of their children. However, uneven bargaining power, manipulation and control, fear and acquiescence are the markings of most relationships involving domestic violence. Because cooperation and joint decision-making is virtually impossible for a batterer and his victim, Michigan's recently enacted court rule on mandatory mediation excepts domestic violence victims from its' requirements.²⁸ In fact joint custody arrangements, like mediation, may be not only problematic but also dangerous in relationships with a violent history.²⁹ Indeed, many abusers find that, after separation, use of the children is often the best way to continue to abuse and harass their former partners.³⁰ Many battered women report threats against their lives during visitation and exchanges, and some are killed in those contexts.³¹ In fact, it has been found that a key indicator of risk in domestic violence situations is the abuser's access to the victim,³² which joint custody arrangements inevitably supply.

CONCLUSION

HB 4546 and HB 4664, as proposed, will have diametrically opposite effects for survivors of domestic violence in child custody proceedings. HB 4546, which creates a presumption against awarding custody to perpetrators of domestic violence, would go a long way in protecting survivors of domestic violence and their children. Rather than tossing domestic violence in the mix with eleven other best interest factors, it would create a common sense presumption in the law that it is not in the best interests of our children to be raised by parents with a history of violent behavior.

HB 4664, however, would create a mandatory presumption of joint custody in all custody disputes between parents, regardless of whether the relationship involved domestic violence. Such a presumption would do a disservice to children, who suffer the detrimental effects of living with domestic violence, and to survivors, whose only hope of regaining control and safety in their lives is complete disconnection with their batterer. Joint custody in domestic violence situations forces

²⁵ *Position Paper*, Family Law Section of the Michigan State Bar (2001).

²⁶ MCLA 722.31, MSA 25.513(1)

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ MCR 3.216(D)(3)(b).

²⁹ Crites & Coker, *supra* note 1, at 14.

³⁰ Zorza, Joan, *Protecting the Child in Custody: Disputes When One parent Abuses the Other*, CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW, Vol. 29, No. 12 (April 1996), p. 1117.

³¹ Sheeran, Maureen and Hampton, Scott, *Supervised Visitation in Cases of Domestic Violence*, JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JOURNAL (spring 1999), p. 14.

³² *Id.* At 14.

a survivor to have ongoing contact with her batterer, and would require her "cooperation" with a person that has successfully used force, coercion and manipulation against her during their relationship. The batterer can therefore maintain access to the victim through their judicially created relationship as joint custodians.

Although as a society we place a high value on the parent's right of access to their children, we must balance that right with the dangers posed to domestic violence survivors and their children following a separation. HB 4546 would make it harder for abusive parents to gain custody of their children, thereby raising the safety and well being of victim-parents and children above the other best interest considerations generally applied to child custody disputes. HB 4664, on the other hand, would make it easier for abusive parents to be awarded joint custody of their children, and would virtually eliminate the application of factor (k), as well as the other best interest factors, to parental custody disputes. The adoption of HB 4546, and rejection of HB 4664, would bring Michigan in line with the many other states that have strengthened the civil relief available to protect domestic violence survivors and their children.