

Mom #15
La Crosse, WI 54601

October 5th, 2020

RE: Wisconsin Bias Against Mothers and Kids Surviving Abuse

Dear Vernon County Board of Supervisors and all carbon copied on this letter,

My abusive ex-boyfriend took me to court for more custody of my children in Vernon County when we planned to move to La Crosse County back in the spring of 2019. During the initial meeting with the Vernon County GAL, George Hopkins, I shared my history with domestic abuse that happened during our relationship. I told Hopkins that I hate talking about it because I do not want to be looked at as a victim, and Hopkins explained if I were to fight for sole custody, I would have to testify to the abuse in court. This left me in a panicked state, because I didn't want my ex's lawyer to be allowed the chance to destroy me on the stand. I talked this over with my lawyer and decided I still needed to go for sole custody, for the safety of my children, while still granting their dad some placement time with the kids. The discussions dragged out for months. My ex-boyfriend's lawyer ended up with a medical condition, which held things up for a long period of time (several months). My lawyer would try to get in contact with her so we could get something settled out of court, but she was flat out not available or wouldn't return any calls/messages.

In Feb of 2020 my 6 year old child told me of accusations against her father of sexual abuse. I reported this to the police who decided to conduct a forensic interview. During the interview my daughter did speak of things concerning. The interviewer, JoEllen Egge, of the Vernon County Police Department, told me she would like to maybe speak with the girls again following this first interview. Within a few days my other daughter wanted to talk to the officer again so I emailed her and we went back down for a second interview where my older daughter talked about witnessing abuse from him on another child. The police spoke with my ex who confirmed all the above, and apologized stating he "had things to work on." The investigator JoElled Egge said she verbally spoke with CPS in Vernon County who didn't find it concerning enough to get involved. She told me she wished she could do more to help my children and myself. She felt it was very wrong what he did, but unfortunately her hands were tied. She encouraged counseling.

My child had more concerning statements arise after day visits with the dad and I reached out to the investigator JoEllen Egge who said she would be willing to speak to her again. At this point I asked for a Stepping Stone interview so we wouldn't have to keep interviewing because my child was growing tired of talking to people about this. The investigator told me she was qualified the same and she could conduct the interview herself. She took my child to a park area and tried to interview there but received little to no information. My child wanted to play vs talk. She said

once again she felt bad she couldn't do anything with the information she had. She said her heart went out to my children and myself and encouraged me to keep her updated.

I spoke to La Crosse CPS with more concerns who routed me to Maureen Nueville, a therapist through Piece of Mind Counseling. My child disclosed information to the therapist who stated she had to report to CPS, but she didn't do so right away. I actually ended up calling CPS myself the following day (post 24 hours from the statements being made) to report. CPS didn't want to listen to me at first, until I demanded to speak to someone. Aly Click, of La Crosse CPS, was assigned our case. She came out and spoke with both my children for about 15 mins each and then decided to request a Stepping Stone interview the following day. My younger child did disclose some comments during the interview, but it wasn't enough for them to take legal action. Aly Click never came back out to speak to my children following the interview. She made contact about the possibility of seeing my daughters again shortly after the interview and I said we needed time to recover from the harrowing interview experiences. Click then spoke with my abusive ex-boyfriend, per her email, "many times" and concluded he was "a safe person."

My younger daughter continued to get worse after day visits with the dad. She continued to make concerning statements of memories, started having more anxiety and panic attacks, experienced a lot of GI issues, and even threatened self harm if I made her go back to see her father. The GAL, Mr. Hopkins, stated he felt overnights should be allowed. I spoke to him directly and said I don't know what to do and he said this all "needs to go in front of a judge." Mr. Hopkins himself told me a few times he felt more happened to my children but unfortunately he had to work as an attorney and off evidence. The investigator, JoEllen Egge, told me she wished she could have done more but her hands were tied by the same lack of evidence threshold. And the counselor, Maureen Nueville, told me often that I'm stuck in a really bad position and she didn't have answers for me. All told me there wasn't an order in place regarding placement so it was my choice to hold the kids back. Hopkins told me he wouldn't hold it against me in court if I held back placement. Counselor Maureen Nueville recommended no overnights and even submitted this to the courts.

During trial with Judge Rood, since the counselor Maureen Nueville wasn't subpoenaed, Judge Rood wouldn't even review her letter during the trial, because it was "hearsay" and she wasn't present to back it up. Judge Rood simply said there was no evidence showing why my abusive ex-boyfriend couldn't have placement and she granted him a ton of time to make-up for the time I "withheld" my children. Judge Rood didn't care to hear that I withheld per verbal recommendation of every professional I worked with. She didn't care to see my reactions came from the uncomfortable conversations of professionals telling me they just didn't know what to do at this point. And she didn't bother to realize there was no actual order for placement prior to this hearing to legally argue I was withholding placement.

We transitioned counselors because Maureen Nueville disclosed that she was looking to retire. She recommended Amanda Erickson, who is a therapist with Peace of Mind Counseling. During her time with my children, they told her with their dad present of experiences of inappropriate touches and how it made them feel. Per my oldest child, their father simply said he was sorry for making them feel that way. Ms. Erickson did nothing with this information. Instead she reviewed it as a healthy step moving forward, not as the acknowledgement there are actual issues to address on the table.

Trial continued in June of 2020 until September of 2020, and Judge Rood rushed the entire trial. She gave us 2 days of 3 hours each to discuss everything from school to holidays to finances. My abusive ex-boyfriend's lawyer, Amy Smith, used up the majority of this time with discussion of things not relevant such as a picture text message of my dog I accidentally sent to my ex boyfriend or about my work schedule and how much money I made, not allowing my side to really bring forward all of our concerns about the safety of my children regarding not only sexual abuse but physical abuse admitted on another child. I had several witnesses the judge didn't want to hear from which include my sister who witnessed past abuse with myself and my two close friends who witnessed my daughter's breakdowns. The two witnesses I had testify were on a really small time limit (roughly 10 mins) due to Judge Rood wanting to be done by noon. And in the end we were not finished addressing the history chain of events showing multiple forms of abuse, but Judge Rood said the trial needed to be done and solved. I never had a chance to even try to explain why we live the way we live: how I was forced to be the only parent, how I continuously tried giving him the benefit of the doubt, how I never withheld placement up until the allegations were brought forward against sexual abuse on my child, how I always kept my personal feelings towards the man away from their relationship with him. I never had a chance to tell her about the abuse I suffered at his hands, nor my worries for my children. I was told that I "overreacted" despite all the comments the professionals made towards me agreeing with my worries and Judge Rood said that he was "a good man" and needed to be involved in the children's life. To make matters worse, when investigator JoEllen Egge testified on stand, she was inaccurate with the information she gave. I followed up after trials via email with investigator Egge who replied, "I apologize," and went on to explain how statements were made to make her believe one way when the emails clearly showed it was a miscommunication on her end. She testified off assumptions versus facts.

Judge Rood overlooked that I never withheld placement prior to investigation, overlooked that he actually did see the kids during the investigation but it was supervised, and refused to listen to the entire investigation process, and what my kids actually were saying/not wanting to say/scared to say. She didn't care at all to hear anything about the history of domestic matters with him and myself and actually would shut me down on stand if my lawyer tried to ask questions about it stating it wasn't relevant to the case. She didn't care that he abused another child out of anger

and admitted that to the police. She didn't care about anything but my abusive ex-boyfriend's rights to the children.

I was ordered to pay attorney fees for my abusive ex-boyfriend, since I "dragged out" the case even though I had been rushed and the delays were by the police and county workers' partial investigations out of my control. My children were ordered more time with their father. Since the order was placed, my children have come forward with more concerns, but at this point I'm terrified to report anything, out of fear of having more time taken away from me. But I also can't handle having children in fear every time I send them somewhere they're terrified of. I'm entirely lost as a parent with what I'm supposed to do. My abusive ex-boyfriend and his current girlfriend have made comments and shamed my children for speaking up for what they have said to me and their professionals. Because of this and the history, my children have explained absolute hatred for their father and what he did to them. But they continue to see him, unsupervised. And my children are continuing to fall apart in front of me.

Wisconsin, as many states, is not supporting women and children who have survived abuse, often blaming us for our own trauma and punishing us when we try to honestly say what has and is happening to us. Please help. Stop abusive men's right from being the most important part of a judicial, enforcement, legal, and social work system that should be protecting the most vulnerable survivors instead.

Sincerely,
Mom #15