

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

1080 S. University Ave.

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1106

saunddan@umich.edu

(734)-763-6415

Date: September 20, 2016

To: Michigan House Committee on Families, Children, and Seniors

From: Daniel G. Saunders, Ph.D., Professor

RE: HR03327, a resolution to encourage awareness and sensitivity to the concept of parental alienation.

I have some recommendations I would like you to consider regarding HR03327, a resolution to “encourage awareness and sensitivity to the concept of parental alienation”. I am a social scientist who has conducted research on parental alienation and domestic violence. Although professionals’ awareness of “parental alienation” is important, the resolution needs to go further in recognizing family violence as the most significant reason children are reluctant to be with a parent.

Scientists do not have complete agreement on a definition, but most define “alienation” as occurring when a child has an unreasonable reluctance to be with a parent, which may or may not be caused by the other parent. There is growing recognition by social scientists that parental alienation can have a wide variety of causes. A related concept, “estrangement” is often defined as the child’s *reasonable* reluctance to be with a parent, often caused by child maltreatment or domestic violence.

The greatest need is for professionals to diligently investigate whether alienation or estrangement is occurring and to uncover the reason for it. An emphasis on family violence in investigations is necessary because the estimated prevalence of estrangement due to family violence is substantially greater than the prevalence of parental alienation. Moreover, a high proportion of cases labeled by professionals as “high conflict” and “parental alienation” are cases involving domestic violence. In addition to the harm caused by exposing their children to domestic violence, many domestic abusers denigrate their ex-partners in front of their children and undermine their ex-partners’ parenting ability. The emotional damage to children from inter-parental conflict, child maltreatment and domestic violence has been well established; however, harm from “parental alienation” has not been conclusively demonstrated. A recent review of

scientific literature concluded that “Although a range of profoundly negative long-term consequences of parental alienation have been asserted, empirical findings about the nature and extent of those effects have been mixed and unreliable (Saini et al. 2016)

Unfortunately, many professionals lack the skills to detect child maltreatment and domestic abuse, or they minimize the maltreatment and abuse if they do detect it. Bias is also a problem among professionals. Professionals who believe in high rates of false allegations of abuse and high rates of parental alienation are more likely to recommend that domestic abusers be granted child custody. Therefore, professionals need better training to reduce bias and to discern the underlying causes of alienation and estrangement, in particular family violence. The risk of error in decision-making is very serious because a parent labeled an “alienator” may actually be raising genuine concerns about child safety, with the abusive ex-partner making false allegations of alienation.

(Note: For an elaboration of these points and the scientific support for them see Saunders, D. G., & Faller, K. C. (2016). The need to carefully screen for family violence when parental alienation is claimed. Michigan Family Law Journal, 46, 7-11.)