

Hello, Delegates, thank you for the chance to address you about the important issue before you in HB1481. I support this bill on behalf of myself and so many others in the widowed community, as it seeks to fix unintended consequences of a 2021 grandparents' visitation law that is now hurting my family and threatening many others.

A 2021 law allowed grandparents to petition the courts for visitation of children in the case of a deceased partner. In other words, I'm a widow, and once my late husband died, this law allowed his mother to come after me for court-ordered visitation. As with all legislation, the intentions of this law were good. Grandparents who have lost a child have been through the unthinkable, and we all hope and pray that even in stressful, awful situations, family bonds can remain healthy. But the fact is we do not live in an ideal world, and when the rights of parents are put on par with the rights of third parties in family court, the consequences for parents and kids can be devastating. Especially when that parent is a newly single parent and has lost their spouse or partner, expensive legal troubles are the very last thing that hurting parent needs while trying to provide a stable, loving home for her kids through a traumatic event.

I lost my first husband in 2015 in a cycling accident. I was seven months pregnant with my second child and had a toddler at home. At that point, parenting decisions for my children became, due to these tragic circumstances, mine alone. Unfortunately, my former mother-in-law thinks parenting decisions should also be hers, and would like much more extensive visitation than we can allow. We never cut off contact, and are in contact with other grandparents and members of my late husband's family. But we are uncomfortable with anything but occasional supervised visits due to what we viewed as safety and honesty concerns about times the children were in my former mother-in-law's care. The Supreme Court of the United States (*Troxel v. Granville*), the Supreme Court of Va. (*Williams v. Williams*), and Virginia code affirm (1-240.1.) that it is one of the most fundamental rights of parents to make decisions for how they raise their children without the interference of the state except where there is a compelling interest of the state and possible harm to kids. There is none here.

I remarried in 2020 and have had two children in the last two years to add to our growing family. My husband adopted my first two children. We both have full, legal parental rights, and even the petition to the court concedes we are fit parents. Despite this, we have had to spend a tremendous amount of money and time fighting what amounts to a familial disagreement in court, and now in the legislature. We believe we should use our resources to help other widows to avoid this nightmare. We believe that a well-intentioned legislature did not foresee this law would infringe on the rights of the most vulnerable parents to parent their children as they see fit. But it has, and we want you to know our story. Two Virginia circuit courts have agreed that this law infringes on parental rights, in Washington County and Prince William County.

We would love for you to address these concerns to prevent other families already hurting from loss from being hurt by having to defend their basic parenting decisions in court. I know so many strong widows and their children, and they need to be parenting and healing, not in court.