



January 2019
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Family Law Commission Public Hearing 2019

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My name is Mariann Kenville-Moore and I am with the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence. On behalf of the Coalition, I would like to express our gratitude for the Commissions work and for this opportunity to share our thoughts, experiences, and concerns.

As a social worker with over 30 years of experience, I can attest to the difficulty that many people face when they interact with the legal system, and also to the enormous effort that has been made through the years to improve the experience. But as you will/have heard tonight, there is still more work to be done.

My remarks this evening focus on the ongoing need for victims of domestic violence and their families, and their ability to safely and effectively access our civil justice system. Routinely survivors share the story of feeling inadequately prepared to go to court, having difficulty accessing affordable legal representation, and feeling like the legal system may have actually made things worse for them. Frequent themes include litigants feeling that the Court did not hear the whole story, or that they felt pressured to negotiate or agree to things to avoid upsetting the assigned judicial officer, or feeling unsafe due to lack of privacy or the ability to wait in a separate waiting areas. Our courts continue to have high volumes and large dockets. Our Kent and Sussex County Family Court buildings lack desperately needed space and security infrastructure. Litigants continue to feel overwhelmed and unprepared navigating the complex workings of the legal system, but we are fortunate in Delaware to have very bright, talented and dedicated people working collectively on these issues.

Over the last year, Family Court updated their website and Resource Centers to reflect changes to procedures, policies, and resources. This past October the Family Court held a public meeting and press event sharing this information. <https://courts.delaware.gov/family/?stx=court+enhancement+project>

The changes have been made with the goal of improving the litigant's experience in the court primarily by focusing on information sharing and assisting litigants with their decision making. Because these are new resources, we have yet to be able to evaluate their impact. But Delaware now has detailed information about the Protection from Abuse process and the Child Custody process on-line. If Commission members haven't yet explored these resources, we encourage you to do so and to provide feedback to the Court and the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council on ways information sharing can be improved.

I can report that the service community and clients we serve report greater satisfaction with the process. But our request for needed improvements remain:

- Delaware needs modern, safe and accessible Family Court buildings in Kent and Sussex Counties.
- Delawareans need access to legal help desks in each courthouse. Annual DCADV participates in a statewide service need study and again victims tell us that they continue to struggle accessing legal advocacy services. Respondents face even more barriers to legal advice. A legal help desk would be a great tool.



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We are very supportive of the efforts of the Chief Judge and the Chief Justice to improve the courts and to make them safer and more accessible. But those efforts will also require the financial support of the state moving forward. The Coalition respectfully requests that this Commission focus its attention on these issues and advocate for the financial resources needed to truly improve victim safety and access to justice.

Thank you.

Submitted by:
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January 24, 2019