

The Daily Telegram

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Editorial: Journey to D.C. raises equal parenting issue

Robb MacKenzie, Robert Pedersen and hundreds of other supporters of equal parenting have seen firsthand the damage Michigan's broken divorce system can cause.

Devoted parents may be limited to having their children four days or fewer per month under typical one-parent physical custody rulings. Children, often taken by one parent as a divorce tactic, may rarely see anyone from an entire set of relatives.

MacKenzie and Pedersen bicycled through Adrian on Saturday en route to Washington, D.C., hoping to publicize a state House bill to change Michigan's custody law and move closer to equal parenting. The bill, HB 4564, has been bottled up in the Families and Children's Services Committee where a similar bill last year was blocked on a 4-4 tie vote when Rep. Dudley Spade, D-Tipton, passed rather than vote.

Seeking equal parenting for fit parents is a cause Pedersen says he's come to believe in the hard way.

"I was essentially blindsided with a divorce," said Pedersen, who recently was named national runner-up in Best Life magazine's Hero Dad contest. "It was a heated divorce primarily because of the child custody dispute. I was essentially told I would have to give her the house or she would go for full custody of the children."

"We live a fantasy that the American legal system is always fair. ... Then I was told there was no way the judge would agree to joint parenting because there was disagreement over custody."

That issue — "disagreement over custody" — makes court-ordered joint parenting infrequent. Despite studies showing children usually benefit from having both parents

present and involved, joint parenting was awarded only 23 percent of the time in 2002, according to the Michigan Department of Community Health. Mothers received custody almost 65 percent of the time; dads, just 10.2 percent.

Regardless of gender, Pedersen says the real issue is the effect on children and the rights of fit parents who do not receive near-equal time with their children. That could be changed by HB 4564. In cases in which parents do not reach their own agreement, and neither is deemed unfit, joint parenting would be the norm rather than a rarity.

Opponents including the Michigan National Organization for Women have argued the bill would not give judges enough flexibility and that it could increase domestic violence.

Pedersen disagrees. He says judges will still have the final say, but that guidelines will require clear evidence rather than allegations made in the heat of a divorce battle.

He also notes that Michigan already has numerous laws against domestic violence. Changes needed should be made to those laws — not tacked onto one regarding child custody.

Furthermore, Pedersen points to studies in states with more-equal custody rules that show a decrease in violence. He attributes that to parents being less frustrated when custody is more equitable.

Nobody expects equal parenting in each case. However, 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce, and there's no basis to think most involve abuse or criminal behavior. Such cases in which one parent is largely excluded ought to be the exception, not the rule.

Polls show state citizens overwhelmingly support equal parenting. Like other civil rights progress, though, changing a biased status quo takes time. Some day, people such as Pedersen and McKenzie will be viewed as leaders for their efforts.

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