

From the Desk of Bill and Deborah Owens

April 24, 2021

Texas House of Representatives
House Committee on Juvenile Justice & Family Issues
Hearing: April 26, 2021

RE: HB803 - Relating to equal parenting orders in suits affecting the parent-child relationship

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

We write to you today to ask you to improve the lives of thousands of Texas children by passing HB803, the shared parenting bill.

Though we are writing in our private capacity as parents and involved citizens, this is an issue we care deeply about. As the founder and executive director of the Coalition of African American Pastors, we have seen the devastation that divorce, custody issues, and the lack of two involved parents have done to generations of children. Few communities have been as negatively affected by our broken custody laws as the African American community. Far too many young Black children grow up in single parent homes without an active and involved father.

The social science is clear: Children who grow up in single parent homes - usually fatherless - have higher rates of suicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, teen pregnancy, and behavioral problems. They have lower levels of educational attainment and are more likely to end up incarcerated or in trouble with the law. It is, in short, an arrangement that breeds poverty and despair, and it all begins with a broken custody system.

Currently, the laws governing child custody in Texas operate on the presumption that the mother should be the custodial parent. Too often, this approach deprives children of an involved father while putting unneeded pressure on the mother to fill both parental roles.

In addition to being archaic, the current system is intrinsically biased against minority and low income families. Litigating for shared custody is an expensive and time-consuming process. For those unable to afford it (generally lower-income families, which can include disproportionate representation of ethnic and racial minorities), the only real option is to accept the “default” solution with a single custodial parent. That leaves many minority and low income children in a custody arrangement where only one parent (usually the mother) is active in their daily lives and the father is little more than a weekend visitor.

HB803 would address this inequity by creating a presumption in favor of shared parenting, except when one parent is unfit. It is a simple solution to a problem that is hurting both parents and children in our state.

By changing our custody laws to favor shared parenting, you will help both parents remain more involved and active in their children’s lives, leading to better long-term educational and health outcomes. Moreover, you will help both mothers and fathers by implementing a fairer system that doesn’t overburden one parent while shutting out the other.

This is an issue that cuts across party divisions, racial lines, and socioeconomic class. HB803 is an important step towards helping the children of our state. We urge you to pass this bill.

Thank you,

Handwritten signatures of William Owens and Deborah Owens. The signature of William Owens is on the left, and the signature of Deborah Owens is on the right.

Rev. Bill Owens and Dr. Deborah Owens