

*March 1, 2013*

***TO: THE PEOPLE OF LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT 8***

***CHILDREN WHO WITNESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ARE VICTIMS***

**We are aware that children who are the targets of abuse can carry the scars of that abuse for a lifetime. However, there is less awareness that children who witness violent abuse are also victims and that they too can carry the scars of the violence they saw or heard.**

**Legislation, which I support, addresses this issue. The measure – HB 478 increases the penalties for committing a violent crime within sight or earshot of a child 2 years to 16 years old. Those found guilty of exposing a child to a crime of violence can be sentenced to five years imprisonment in addition to any other sentence imposed for the crime of violence. A similar bill passed the House last year and received a favorable vote from the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, but was not voted on by the full Senate. I am hopeful that the measure receives General Assembly approval during this session.**

**In 2003, the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect released a report pointing out the negative effects in both attitudes and behavior suffered by children from witnessing violent acts. In it, they describe these children as “invisible victims.” The emotional and behavioral consequences borne by these children reach into and affect their growing and adult years. In short, research found that children exposed to violence are more aggressive and disobedient. They tend to be more withdrawn and depressed and have low self-esteem. They usually perform poorly in school and have difficulty with problem solving.**

**According to the Coalition Against Domestic Violence, boys exposed to domestic violence are twice as likely to repeat that behavior pattern with their own spouses and children. Researchers warn that the strongest risk factor in the transmission of violent behavior from one generation to the next is for a child to witness violence in the home repeatedly.**

**Under current Maryland law, child abuse requires some degree of physical or sexual injury to a child for that child to be deemed a victim. We should not turn a blind eye to the conclusions of research and experts in the field of child abuse, which has emphasized that the child does not have to sustain the physical abuse to be a victim of abuse. The child who witnesses violence is every bit as much a victim as the person who actually is abused. Twenty-two states agree that the child who witnesses abuse must be protected and these states have enacted laws similar to HB 478. Knowing the probable consequences of failing to enact laws to protect these “invisible victims” of violent behavior, we dare not turn our backs on these children.**

**Please do not hesitate to contact me on this or any other legislative issue of concern to you. As always, I encourage and welcome your input.**