Bring the federally enacted VAWA "Kayden's Law" to your state to increase protections for children.

"Kayden's Law" is named after Kayden Mancuso, a 7-year-old girl from Bucks County, Pennsylvania who was murdered by her father during his court-ordered unsupervised parenting time. Kayden's mother, Kathy Sherlock, submitted evidence to the court of the father's abusive, violent history – including criminal records and a protection from abuse order for having threatened to kill family members. A professional recommended that he be required to have mental health treatment before receiving unsupervised access, but he was nevertheless granted unsupervised contact with little Kayden. The father beat Kayden to death, tied a bag over her head, left a note of retribution on her body, and then killed himself.

As Congress has now recognized, Kayden's story is not unique: many U.S. children – estimates are in the tens of thousands - have been put at risk and even killed by a dangerous parent, many after a family court rejected safety concerns voiced by a protective parent. Furthermore, it is well-documented that abusive parents frequently use family courts as a means of continuing their abuse post-separation to hurt and control their former partners by taking away or harming the children. Profound system problems in U.S. family courts have been reported and studied, yet children continue to be sent into harm's way.

The Keeping Children Safe From Family Violence Act or "Kayden's Law" in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) provides federal funds to states which improve their child custody laws to better protect at-risk children by:

1. Restricting expert testimony to only those who are appropriately qualified to provide it: Evidence from court-appointed or outside professionals regarding alleged abuse may be admitted only when the professional possesses demonstrated expertise and experience in working with victims of the types of abuse at issue, whether domestic violence, child abuse, or child sexual abuse.
2. Limiting the use of reunification camps and therapies which cannot be proven to be safe and effective: No "reunification treatment" may be ordered by the court without scientifically valid and generally accepted proof of the safety, effectiveness, and therapeutic value of the particular treatment.
3. Providing evidence-based ongoing training to judges and court personnel on family violence, including: (i) child sexual abuse; (ii) physical abuse; (iii) emotional abuse; (iv) coercive control; (v) implicit and explicit bias; (vi) trauma; (vii) long and short-term impacts of domestic violence and child abuse on children; and
(viii) victim and perpetrator behaviors.
4. Requiring that family courts making parenting time decisions consider past evidence of abuse, including protection orders, convictions and arrests for domestic violence or child abuse.

Next Steps:

For State Lawmakers: Policy and legal experts from the National Family Violence Law Center at GW Law who provided the technical expertise for Kayden's Law, in both the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and in Pennsylvania, are available to answer questions and provide technical assistance to interested state lawmakers. Email: dpollack@law.gwu.edu | www.law.gwu.edu/national-family-violence-law-center | IG: nfvlc_at_gwu | TW: @nfvlcgwu | FB: www.facebook.com/NFVLC

For Advocates: The National Safe Parents Organization provides training and support for advocates and concerned citizens to bring this important legislation to individual states. Join the NSPO advocacy community online to take action and coordinate with other advocates, or email to be connected with advocate coordinators in your state. Email: advocacy@nationalsafeparents.org | www.nationalsafeparents.org | IG: nationalsafeparentscoalition | TW: @safe_parents *Thank you for bringing VAWA Kayden's Law to your state to protect children!*