

Circuit Court for Harford County  
Case No. C-12-FM-25-807578

UNREPORTED  
IN THE APPELLATE COURT  
OF MARYLAND\*

No. 173

September Term, 2025

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PRENTIS VINSON, JR.

v.

SHANTELE VINSON

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Graeff,  
Ripken,  
Eyler, Deborah S.  
(Senior Judge, Specially Assigned)

JJ.

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Opinion by Graeff, J.

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Filed: September 18, 2025

\*This is an unreported opinion. This opinion may not be cited as precedent within the rule of stare decisis. It may be cited for persuasive value only if the citation conforms to Md. Rule 1-104(a)(2)(B).

Prentis Vinson (“Husband”) appeals from a final protective order issued against him by the Circuit Court for Harford County based on the petition filed by his wife, Shantele Vinson (“Wife”). He presents four issues for this Court’s review,<sup>1</sup> which we have combined and rephrased, as follows:

Was the evidence sufficient to support the court’s final protective order?

For the reasons set forth below, we shall affirm the judgment of the circuit court.

### **FACTUAL AND PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND**

The Vinsons were married for more than 15 years. On February 5, 2025, Wife filed an incident report with the Harford County Sheriff’s Office alleging verbal domestic abuse. The report stated that, on the previous day, Wife and Husband had a verbal argument, during which Husband “removed the bedroom door and removed the mattress from the bed.” That same day, Wife petitioned the court for protection from domestic violence, alleging verbal and emotional abuse that occurred on February 4.

On February 10, 2025, Wife filed a complaint for absolute divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. The complaint alleged that the marriage should be terminated

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<sup>1</sup> The issues presented in Husband’s informal brief are as follows:

1. Plaintiff was allowed to exaggerate evidence.
2. Plaintiff made frivolous claims.
3. The Court misapplied the law.
4. The evidence presented to prove plaintiff’s complaint did not meet the legal standard for issuance of a domestic violence order.

because Husband “ha[d] been verbally abusive and emotionally abusive . . . for over 15 years,” and Husband refused to get counseling.

On February 28, 2025, the circuit court held a contested hearing on Wife’s final protective order. Wife and Husband both testified.

## **I.**

### **Wife’s Testimony**

Wife testified that, on February 4, 2025, at 9:30 p.m., she and Husband argued. The argument got heated, and Wife “left the living room and went to the guestroom.” She locked the guestroom door, and Husband “came to the door yelling at [her] through the door, insisting that [she] unlock the door.” Husband left, but approximately 30 or 40 minutes later, Husband returned, and he continued “yelling, kicking, banging on the door, [and] insisting that [Wife] open it.” Husband called Wife’s cellphone repeatedly until she placed it on do not disturb. Husband continued to “kick and bang at the door until 3:00 in the morning,” while yelling, belittling her, and calling her names.

Wife testified that Husband had acted similarly in prior arguments, which would typically escalate and become “very verbal to the point where it goes on for hours.” The night of the argument, she was lying in the bed while Husband remained outside the locked door. She was afraid and scared of Husband because he previously had exhibited these behaviors, which had led her to move into the guestroom in December 2024. She explained that the guestroom was the only place in the house where she felt safe and could get away from Husband. She refused to unlock the door because she “did not want him in [her] face

screaming and hollering at [her],” and she was worried that Husband would hit her. She did not feel comfortable leaving the guestroom at any point that evening. Although her son, J.V., was home, Wife was unsure whether he heard or witnessed the altercation because it was a big house, and he was in his room at the other end.<sup>2</sup>

The following day, February 5, 2025, Wife returned from work to discover that the guestroom door had been removed and the mattress taken off the bed. She testified that this made her feel like the only safe place in her own home was gone. She later found the mattress in the master bedroom closet and the guestroom door in the garage, stripped of its screws. She also discovered that the code to her safe had been changed, preventing her access. She called the police, and after speaking with several officers at the residence, she “went straight . . . to file the petition.”

When asked about prior history, Wife initially denied physical violence. She later clarified, however, that Husband had slapped her on the arm and pushed her nose, which she did not know was “considered violence . . . because they didn’t leave marks or bruises.” On one occasion, she hid in the shower to avoid an argument, and Husband entered the bathroom and slapped her arm because she “would not engage in the argument with him.”

Wife testified that the frequency of arguments increased in 2024. The arguments arose from “anything” and made her feel like she was “walking on eggshells.” She testified that, when Husband did not get his way, and she refused to do something that he wanted,

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<sup>2</sup> J.V. was 15 years old at the time of the hearing.

he became aggressive and verbally abusive. Wife was fearful that Husband would become more aggressive and violent after she filed for divorce and removed him from the home.

At the hearing, Wife requested emergency family maintenance to cover the mortgage and solar panel payments, approximately \$3,200 per month. She testified that she earned \$78,000 annually as a Baltimore City Public Schools teacher, with only \$500 remaining from her paycheck after taxes and expenses, excluding groceries. She also received \$338 per month from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Husband was self-employed, operating a dump truck business that generated between \$150,000 and \$400,000 annually.

Mother requested temporary custody of J.V. for the duration of the protective order. J.V. had been living with her since February 5, 2025, when the temporary order was issued. Wife testified that she did not want direct contact with Husband, even regarding J.V., and she requested that all communications occur through a third party. She stated that J.V. was old enough to decide if he wanted to see Husband and how much time he wanted to spend with him. She insisted that visitation exchanges occur in a public place, not the marital home, because she was afraid of Husband.

On cross-examination, Mother acknowledged that she initially sought no contact between Husband and J.V. She later determined, however, that such restrictions were not good for J.V.'s mental or emotional health. She testified that Husband had never been violent toward J.V.

## **II.**

### **Husband's Testimony**

Husband denied attempting to break down the guestroom door on February 4. He testified that he merely knocked intermittently, every few hours, and he left when Wife did not answer the door. He never kicked the door. He testified that he was trying to communicate with his wife.

Husband testified that he removed the door frame and mattress to repair a broken bedframe. He denied ever hitting Wife or engaging in the conduct she described, including slapping or pushing her.

## **III.**

### **Circuit Court's Findings & Order**

The circuit court found:

[T]hat there is a preponderance of the evidence to believe that [Husband] did commit an act of abuse placing [Wife] in fear of imminent serious bodily injury.

I found [Wife's] testimony to be compelling, to be chilling, to be direct. In her testimony, her fear clearly came out in this court. There was no doubt in the Court's mind about the events that she described on February 4th, and [Husband's] account was simply not believable to this Court.

The Court finds that [the] parties on February 4th, starting about 9:30, had a heated argument. [Wife] went to the guestroom to get away from [Husband] and locked the door. She went there for her safety. [Husband] kept banging and kicking on the door into the early morning hours. The next day, after [Wife] had left the home, [Husband] took the door off the hinges and removed the mattress.

This was the only place of safety for [Wife]. And it is a place that she needed in light of the prior abusive verbal contact that had been occurring by

[Husband] against [Wife], as well as other points of assault that have occurred including slapping her arm, taking his hand, pushing her nose. All of that is assaultive behavior. So, the Court does find that her fear was genuine that something would happen to her and it's why she sought the safety of the guestroom, which [Husband] took away from her deliberately.

After making its findings of abuse, the court issued a protective order effective for one year, through February 28, 2026. The court awarded custody of J.V. to Wife, with visitation granted to Husband “as the parties agree, but coordinated only through a third party” or directly with J.V. The court further directed that all custody exchanges take place at the Aberdeen Police Department. In addition, Husband was ordered to pay emergency family maintenance in an amount sufficient to cover the monthly mortgage and solar panel bill.

### **DISCUSSION**

Husband, an unrepresented litigant, contends that Wife failed to establish that she was in fear of imminent serious bodily harm, and therefore, the circuit court erred in issuing the domestic violence protection order. He argues that Wife's testimony, including that she never knew that slapping her on the arm or pushing her nose was considered violence, demonstrates that she was not in fear when the events occurred.

Wife, an unrepresented litigant, contends that the circuit court properly issued the final protective order because her testimony established that she reasonably feared Husband. She notes that she testified about the “heated” argument the night before, Husband's persistent pounding on and yelling through the locked guestroom door, his prior

acts of slapping her arm and pushing her nose, and his removal of the guestroom door and mattress.

A trial court may grant a final protective order if there is a finding “by a preponderance of the evidence that the alleged abuse has occurred.” Md. Code Ann., Fam. Law (“FL”) § 4-506(c)(1)(ii) (2019 Repl. Vol.). “[P]reponderance of the evidence’ means ‘more likely than not.’” *C.M. v. J.M.*, 258 Md. App. 40, 56-57 (2023) (quoting *State v. Sample*, 468 Md. 560, 598, (2020)). The statute defines “abuse” to include “an act that places a person eligible for relief in fear of imminent serious bodily harm.” Md. Code Ann., Fam. Law § 4-501(b)(1)(ii). As this court has explained:

In reviewing instances of abuse in the context of a protective order, the proper standard for a circuit court is “an individualized objective one—one that looks at the situation in the light of the circumstances as would be perceived by a reasonable person in the petitioner’s position.” *Katsenelenbogen v. Katsenelenbogen*, 365 Md. 122, 138, 775 A.2d 1249 (2001). This is because “[a] person who has been subjected to the kind of abuse defined in § 4-501(b) may well be sensitive to non-verbal signals or code words that have proved threatening in the past to that victim but which someone else, not having that experience, would not perceive to be threatening.” *Id.* at 139, 775 A.2d 1249.

. . . The issue, . . . was not whether those perceptions were right or wrong, but whether a reasonable person with that background could perceive the situation in the same way.

*Hripunovs v. Maximova*, 263 Md. App. 244, 264-65 (2024) (quoting *Katsenelenbogen*, 365 Md. at 138-39).

On appellate review of a circuit court’s grant of a final protective order, “we accept the circuit court’s findings of facts, unless they are clearly erroneous.” *C.M. v. J.M.*, 258 Md. App. at 58. We “must consider evidence produced at the trial in a light most favorable



to the prevailing party.” *Id.* (quoting *Friedman v. Hannan*, 412 Md. 328, 335 (2010)). We defer to the trial court’s credibility determinations, as it “has the opportunity to gauge and observe the witnesses’ behavior and testimony during the trial.” *Id.* (quoting *Ricker v. Ricker*, 114 Md. App. 583, 592 (1997)). With respect to the circuit court’s ultimate conclusion, “we must make our own independent appraisal by reviewing the law and applying it to the facts of the case.” *Id.* (quoting *Piper v. Layman*, 125 Md. App. 745, 754 (1999)).

Here, the circuit court found “that there [was] a preponderance of the evidence to believe that [Husband] did commit an act of abuse by placing [Wife] in fear of imminent serious bodily injury.” In support of this finding, the court noted that, during the heated argument in February, Wife retreated to the guestroom “to get away” from Husband and locked the door “for her safety,” while Husband “kept banging and kicking on the door.” The following day, Husband removed both the door and the mattress from the guestroom, which the court described as “the only place of safety” for Wife. The court also considered earlier incidents of assault, including Husband slapping Wife’s arm and pushing her nose, in support of its conclusion that Wife’s “fear was genuine that something would happen to her and it’s why she sought the safety of the guestroom, which [Husband] took away from her deliberately.”

The evidence supports the court’s findings. Based on Wife’s testimony, there was evidence to support the court’s conclusion that a reasonable person in Wife’s position –

having previously been assaulted by Husband, who then removed her “only place of safety” – could perceive an imminent threat of serious bodily harm.

Husband argues, however, that Wife’s testimony was not credible. Witness credibility, however, “lies solely within the purview of the fact finder.” *Neal v. State*, 191 Md. App. 297, 318 (2010). On appeal, we “give due regard to the opportunity of the trial court to judge the credibility of the witnesses.” *Gizzo v. Gerstman*, 245 Md. App. 168, 200-01 (2020) (quoting Md. Rule 8-131(c)). In explaining its ruling, the circuit court found, as was in its full discretion, that Wife’s testimony was credible, but that “[Husband’s] account was simply not believable.” The court’s findings in this regard were not clearly erroneous.

**JUDGMENT OF THE CIRCUIT COURT  
FOR HARFORD COUNTY AFFIRMED.  
COSTS TO BE PAID BY APPELLANT.**