

GUEST OPINION

Kayden Mancuso's story can help Kamala Harris in Pennsylvania

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Mothers in Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, have been suffering a brutal fate at the hands of the American family courts as they beg judges to protect their children from unstable fathers. Their demographic mix is broad. They range from educated to non-educated, rich to poor, and Black to white.

Kamala Harris can help these mothers by speaking up for them. And she would certainly earn their vote in the presidential race.

Last month, major television networks and print media around the world covered the tragic story of 3-year-old Ellie Obi Lorenzo, who was recently killed while on a visit with her father, and subsequently tossed into a San Francisco Bay Area recycling center. The father was found to have subsequently committed suicide.

This tragedy was preventable. The mother, Dr. Chrystal Obi, a Stanford Clinical Instructor in Pediatric Radiology, had implored the court over a two-year custody dispute to order supervised visitation for the father because of his "increasingly erratic" behavior and his becoming "progressively unstable," according to court papers filed by the mother.

A similar tragedy gripped Pennsylvania when Kayden Mancuso, a 7-year-old Bucks County girl, was struck by her father three times in the head with a dumbbell and died in a murder-suicide. The Pennsylvania Legislature passed a bill in honor of Mancuso. Equally important, her tragic fate became known to Vice President Harris.

In 2022, Harris was instrumental in the re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which included a provision named "Keeping Children Safe From Family Violence Act," also known as "Kayden's Law."

Yet, in spite of this special provision in VAWA, which requires an evidentiary hearing during child custody proceedings to vet allegations – both new and old – of abuse, the mothers in Pennsylvania, and in other states, are failing miserably in their quest to get a judge to heed their dire concerns about the safety of their children during custody litigation.

Given that many judges respond with incredulity to mothers' pleas for protection of their children from abuse by the other parent, mothers are sometimes penalized with the loss of custody for bringing claims of abuse to the attention of the court.

A passionate supporter of civil rights, Harris may be the best person to champion the cause of Pennsylvania mothers, and mothers in other states too, whose civil rights have been woefully violated in the demoralizing climate of family courts that expose children to the perils of injury and death at the hands of the other parent. As vice president, Harris can call Attorney General Merrick Garland today and request that the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice investigate the egregious civil rights violations suffered by mothers in the family courts post-haste.

She would surely win the vote of the Pennsylvania mothers and elsewhere, and save the lives of children. It would also deter her critics who complain of the monotony of her mantra for abortion rights, by broadening her platform to include "Mothers' Rights."

Sociologist Amy Neustein co-authored "From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers are Running from the Family Courts – And What Can be Done about It." She resides in Fort Lee, N.J. Michelle Etlin coauthored "The Hostage Child." She resides in Pikesville, Md.