

RCW 26.51.010 Findings—Intent. The legislature recognizes that individuals who abuse their intimate partners often misuse court proceedings in order to control, harass, intimidate, coerce, and/or impoverish the abused partner. Court proceedings can provide a means for an abuser to exert and reestablish power and control over a domestic violence survivor long after a relationship has ended. The legal system unwittingly becomes another avenue that abusers exploit to cause psychological, emotional, and financial devastation. This misuse of the court system by abusers has been referred to as legal bullying, stalking through the courts, paper abuse, and similar terms. The legislature finds that the term "abusive litigation" is the most common term and that it accurately describes this problem. Abusive litigation against domestic violence survivors arises in a variety of contexts. Family law cases such as dissolutions, legal separations, parenting plan actions or modifications, and protection order proceedings are particularly common forums for abusive litigation. It is also not uncommon for abusers to file civil lawsuits against survivors, such as defamation, tort, or breach of contract claims. Even if a lawsuit is meritless, forcing a survivor to spend time, money, and emotional resources responding to the action provides a means for the abuser to assert power and control over the survivor.

The legislature finds that courts have considerable authority to respond to abusive litigation tactics, while upholding litigants' constitutional rights to access to the courts. Because courts have inherent authority to control the conduct of litigants, they have considerable discretion to fashion creative remedies in order to curb abusive litigation. The legislature intends to provide the courts with an additional tool to curb abusive litigation and to mitigate the harms abusive litigation perpetuates. [2020 c 311 § 1.]