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Interview with Washington State Senator Manka Dhingra

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Chris Fox

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My name is Chris Fox. I am pleased to be your host today.

We are discussing the recently adjourned 2024 legislative session. With me today is [Manka Dhingra](#). Manka is a Washington State Senator representing Washington's 45th Legislative District. She is an attorney with 23 years of varied experience in the criminal justice system, a community leader, and an anti-domestic violence advocate. Senator Dhingra is the **current [Chair of The Senate Law and Justice Committee](#)**. She is also a **[candidate for the office of Washington Attorney General](#)**.

Welcome, Senator Dhingra.

Manka Dhingra

Thank you, Chris. It is always such a pleasure to be here with you and talk about family law issues.

Chris Fox

The legislature convened for a shortened session. I'm sure it was very hectic and busy for you. Several family law bills were presented, some of which succeeded, and others did not. Of the various bills, which would you like to begin the discussion and focus on?

Manka Dhingra

Thank you, Chris. I would like to talk about [HB 2237](#), which is the parenting plan limitations bill, just because it has a story on how it came about and why it didn't pass, and I think it's something that we have to continue to work on.

Chris Fox

From your vantage point as an anti-domestic violence advocate and as the Chair of Senate Law and Justice Committee - and I believe one of the sponsors - perhaps you can guide us through the route that it took to eventually get "X" filed.¹

¹ "X" filing a bill is just a way for the Rules Committee of each branch (House or Senate) to note that it is very unlikely for the bill to continue progress in the current legislative session. This is most commonly due to a bill being Dictum.Live

Manka Dhingra

This was a bill brought to me by our Superior Court judges. They had come to me the year before and said that they really wanted to update the parenting plan statute. It's been so long since it has been updated and modernized. It needed a good cleanup. What they were hoping to do is an initial cleanup bill, hoping not to make it too controversial and starting the process so that more work can be done on that.

I had introduced a bill in the Senate in the 2023 Legislative Session. It had a good hearing in Law and Justice, and we exited out of the Committee. After we did that, different advocacy groups reached out. Domestic violence advocates said that they didn't really feel they could have participated in the process done by the supreme court judges. I think many of them felt intimidated engaging with the judges and having honest dialogue about some of the provisions. Especially when it came to judicial discretion and so they asked me whether we could take a break on this bill and spend the interim working on it. I spoke to Representative Jamila Taylor in the House who does have a big background in family law, and we decided that made sense. We didn't need to rush through that bill, so we would be the ones to take the time and convene people together if they were concerned about any power dynamics with the judges.

So, everyone agreed to that process and then after session in 2023 Representative Taylor met a lot of the advocate groups, A lot of attorneys with experience here and the Bar Association organizations did a lot of work on this bill.

What's always challenging is it's hard to keep everyone happy. Some people want more things, and some people want fewer things. The bill that was introduced by Representative Taylor - HB 2237 - I actually thought was a very good start to taking a look at the different statutes and try to modernize them, trying to make sure they're implemented in a more just equitable way. Cleaning it up so that it's easier for individuals who may not have an attorney to try to understand what the law says. So, the plan then was to have her introduce the bill in the House and for her to send it over. But things didn't go according to plan. I will say that there was a faction that decided they did not like the bill, and they wanted something different.

I think one of the biggest dynamics that happens when you're dealing with domestic violence family law issues is that regardless of who you are, what your experiences are, there are personal stories. So, this bill and this issue was one where we had a lot of the legislators who aren't lawyers but who had gone through similar experiences themselves or their family members or the kids and they wanted to take their experience and try to address the issues that they face in their personal lives into this bill. So the bill kind of got away from Representative Taylor and me because we then had these few legislators who simply wanted to add a lot more to this bill or make changes to the bill, and those were not changes that had been discussed with the stakeholders or things that people had agreed upon. So, we were in this position where we might end up with a product that may not be workable. And so Representative Taylor then this

ineligible for further consideration based on not making a legislative cut off date. *Source:*
<https://wacivilrights.org/2021/03/22/a-bill-has-been-assigned-to-the-rules-x-file-what-does-that-mean/>

year made the decision not to move the bill forward because it was going to be very challenging to see what the end result of that bill might potentially be.

Chris Fox

I'm looking at the legislative website for this House Bill 2237 and I see several amendments, one offered by Representative Cheney, one by Representative Griffey, and one by Representative Rule. Representative Taylor offered another amendment. Was that an attempt to address and resolve these other amendments that were being proposed?

Manka Dhingra

Yes, yes, so Representative Griffey and Representative Rule wanted to include a lot more in this Bill. There is this national movement on something called Kayden's Law² that they wanted to bring into Washington and put those ideas into this bill and there were concerns that many times when you have these national movements, they may not necessarily coexist very well with individual state laws. Seeing how to incorporate that into our statutes really wasn't done and so that's what I think Representative Griffin's and Representative Rule and then Representative Taylor were trying to figure out how to navigate that situation. And it just became complex because it is a very complex statute and so because of those competing interests and competing interests many times people still work together to find a path. Though given that it was a short session, that ability did not occur in the House. So, the plan now is to see if Representative Taylor will continue convening people together to find a path forward.

One the things that she and I were trying to avoid was to have a task force that does this work and then makes a report to the legislature. We might end up doing that, anyway. So that we may have an official task force with designated members who will then produce a product for the legislature to consider. That could be the path forward. I think that is what she and I were trying to avoid doing, but I think that is where we might end up.

Chris Fox

Three principal attorney groups and judicial groups come to mind. You mentioned the Superior Court Judges Association, and there's also the WSBA Family Law Executive Committee (FLEC) and the Domestic Relations Attorneys of Washington (DRAW). What role do those three and, perhaps others, have in the continuing discussion and what do you anticipate they can provide?

Manka Dhingra

I think all three of those groups will be playing a major role, as they have been doing. We also have other appellate groups that are interested and then we have other survivors that are interested and then we have the father's rights individuals that are interested. It really is about managing all these competing interests and then, as I mentioned, we have the individual legislators who may not have professional experience in this arena or be attorneys who have very specific interests in this field and want to make changes. I will say that the ones that I have heard from have been concerned about judicial discretion and

² <https://legalresearchclub.ua.edu/blog/2022/10/28/kaydens-law-and-the-future-of-family-court/>

they want the Legislature to mandate certain behaviors which I think are extremely challenging because they're very related certain fact patterns. So, I think that tension between how much judicial discretion should be given is always going to be problematic, and this is where we see even victim groups wanting less judicial discretion. I think many of them feel that some judges don't have the background or understanding of domestic violence issues to make the right decision. So, I think a huge part of this is also the education and training component for judicial officers when they're dealing with domestic violence issues in family law cases.

Chris Fox

Regarding the timing in the short session, the bill was first read on January 9th, then it was returned to the House and "X" filed on February 20th. That is an accelerated period to consider this bill. I imagine you had a few other bills that were being considered.

Manka Dhingra

Yes, absolutely. We had a lot of bills, many in the family law arena. Plus, you know all the other builds that we deal with, and so it really was a lot to get through in a short session.

Chris Fox

With the next session being a longer session, what would you suggest or what do you anticipate might occur by way of addressing this bill and hopefully finding the necessary route for its passage?

Manka Dhingra

Thank you. That is really the work that so many of us legislators and stakeholders do when the session ends. So, the next step would be for Representative Taylor and I to convene the stakeholders again and really talk through how we want to move forward. The option would be to look at the amendments that were offered to see if a path forward is there and include them or addressing them or taking some of the issues that people have raised and potentially, we can do a follow-up task force on those issues. So, there are a number of strategies we can employ on how to move forward. But the key will be to make sure we do have another build draft that we circulated among a lot of the stakeholders. One of the benefits of having done this in the short session is we actually know what other legislators are interested in getting involved and so part of the work will be to do that outreach to them keep them updated on the work that's happening and make sure they feel that their issues have been heard or that there's a plan to address the concerns that they have and then the key will be to make sure we drop this bill in December so that come January we can get a hearing scheduled right away and give us as much time as possible to move this bill through the process.

Chris Fox

Drawing back from HB 2237 to other bills that would be in the successful category, perhaps we can focus on bills that you sponsored that successfully passed through the legislature this session?

Manka Dhingra

You know I was very fortunate at this session. I got 12 bills passed³, which is really a record number. The bills that I had dealt a lot with sexual assault ensuring that our laws are being more victim-centered and trauma informed. It went all the way, reporting the rap, dealing with our sexual assault forensic nurses and the processes and the trainings and resources that they go through, all the way through a trial court. And just the way survivors are treated by the court and making sure that a lot of their extremely graphic photos are placed in a confidential um location in the court file so that they have some privacy protection. That was a big one. The second one was about commercial sexual exploitation of children, making sure that regardless of where the child is, that Department of Youth and Correction has a role to play in identifying these children, protecting these children that's going to come into family law issues as well. Depending on how these children identify. And a lot of my work around mental health and substance use disorder that we continued to do.

One of the bills that I'm proud of is [Engrossed SB 5790 - Concerning medical equipment in schools](#). This has a fun story to it. I always bring forward bills that the youth in my district want to advocate for. A few years ago, we had some of these high school students who wanted to make sure we have bleed kits in our schools. These are kits that can help control bleeding if someone is shocked or gets into an accident until the ambulance can come. This bill was introduced by me in 2020 and then Covid hit and so we didn't do much with that bill. This session we had these high school students who were now in college and these trauma surgeons testifying about mandating bleed kits in schools. It was a fun and great combination of people on this bill, and I was very proud to have this passed and signed into law. On a personal level I had some great bills that passed the session, but I'm always happy to support and be a co-sponsor for so many other bills as well.

Chris Fox

I applaud you and the young people who were particularly motivated by this and helped accelerate this bill through the legislature to its successful passage.

Manka Dhingra

Thank you so much. It really was a great combination.

³ [Engrossed Second Substitute Senate Bill 5853: 23-Hour Crisis Relief Centers—Minors;](#)
[Substitute Senate Bill 6146: Concerning Tribal Warrants;](#)
[Second Substitute Senate Bill 6228: Concerning Treatment Of Substance Use Disorders;](#) [Engrossed Senate Bill 6246: Firearm Prohibitions—Mental Health;](#)
[Senate Bill 6308: 988 System Implementation Timelines](#)
[Engrossed SB 5790: Concerning medical equipment in schools.](#)

Chris Fox

Are there any other closing comments that you might like to make regarding the legislative session and how you see the Washington State legislature in terms of its performance in terms of its engagement with citizens that particularly stand out, not only the Western states but around the country?

Manka Dhingra

I am always very proud of the work of the Washington legislators. I was elected in 2017, and with my election we flipped the State, and it turned blue, so the Democrats control the House and the Senate and the Governor's Office. In the last seven years we have ended our sessions on time with a balanced budget. We have seen more women getting involved in the legislature, as well as a diversity of backgrounds. With that has come the richness of the policies we work on. I really think that the bills that have been passed in the last six to seven years Washington is leading the nation when it comes to so many different policy issues. Even though many people don't feel it, we have one of the best economies in the country. We are routinely rated as the best place to live and work for both employers and employees. So, I think there's a lot of really great work being done in our state, and I do want to say that I think we have an extremely inclusive process. Our legislative process is extremely open. We do hybrid hearings so people can testify in person remote from wherever they may be, and all these things are very deliberate to increase participation. I just want all your listeners to know that it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, if you have good ideas on how to fix so many of the problems that we all struggle with you're going to find a lot of elected who are eager to listen and work on solving problems. And I'm talking about on both sides of the aisle. I was very proud that all 12 of my bills were bipartisan bills. One of them was a gun bill, and I got republican support on it.

So, I do think in Washington, we have a culture of working across the aisle. We have a culture of listening and we have a culture of solving problems more.

Chris Fox

Thank you very much Senator. I know I speak on behalf of the family law attorney groups and attorneys in general and the citizenry of the State of Washington to thank you for your service on behalf of the entire state. I wish you well. I also invite you to return for future discussions when you would like to have a conversation about any bills that might be pending or proposed, and ultimately introduced at the next legislative session.

Manka Dhingra

Thank you so much, Chris. I appreciate that invitation and hopefully I'll be talking to you on bills that are attorney general sponsored legislation. Thank you so much for the invitation. I will take you up on it.