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To Members of the Judiciary Committee:

RE: Raised Bill 494 ("An Act Concerning Guardians ad Litem and Attorneys for Minor Children in Family Relations Matters")

As a psychologist and mediator (in private practice in New Haven) and a member of the "Task Force to Study Legal Disputes Involving the Care and Custody of Minor Children," I am pleased to write in support of Raised Bill 494.

While it does not address all of the concerns discussed by the Task Force, this bill would serve the public well by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of GALs and AMCs, as well as the process for appointing and removing GALs and AMCs.

Testimony received by the Task Force pointed out the staggering costs incurred by many families involved in litigation, and RB 494 enumerates some ways to control those costs. Unfortunately the bill does not deal with the costs of parents' own attorneys, which often are substantially higher than the GAL/AMC costs.

Clearly, the best way to reduce legal costs for families in the court system is to reduce their need to be in court. To the extent that conflict can be resolved through mediation, costs (both emotional and financial) can be substantially contained. Section 4 of RB 494 acknowledges the value of mediation in resolving disputes regarding removal of GALs and AMCs, but there are many additional areas in which mediation can effectively reduce time in the courtroom. The Early Intervention Program piloted successfully for several years in the Hartford court and staffed by a panel of volunteer psychologists and attorneys, has kept many cases from going to trial. This program, as the Task Force recommended, deserves to be extended to all judicial districts in the state. Expansion of the mediation services offered within the courts by Family Relations would be another cost-effective way to reduce expensive litigation. Referral of parenting disputes to mental health professionals in the community for "co-parenting counseling" or "parent coordination" is another way to reduce time and money spent in court.

Reducing GAL/AMC costs as outlined in RB 494 will help, but this is only one small part of the solution to the problems that plague our family court system. I urge the Judiciary Committee to review carefully the many other recommendations made by our Task Force and look forward to seeing some of those recommendations enacted into law.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Horwitz, Ph.D.
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