

March 10, 2015

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am testifying in opposition to Committee Bill Number 5505. As a psychologist who performs services for the Courts, Bill 5505 directly affects my ability to function. Section 3 of Bill 5505 proposes that when a Family Court judge orders an evaluation or treatment of family members, the parents will have the ability to choose their own evaluators for themselves and their children. While it may appear superficially to provide the families with some degree of ownership of the process, the ramifications of being able to choose anyone has significantly dire consequences. In the current system, these difficult and complicated evaluations are being performed by psychologists who are highly trained and skilled in this area. Current evaluators have specialized training in the field of divorce and evaluations and are members of forensic organizations. The current evaluators have demonstrated a desire for this specialized training and demonstrate an understanding of highly conflictual cases. Bill 5505 eliminates all of the safeguards that are currently in place and opens the field up to anyone with any level of mental health training. The new bill does not delineate any specialized training requirements for the evaluations and would prove disastrous. Current evaluators have been trained on best models for completing these evaluations, including which psychological tests best identify deficits in parenting as well as mental illness that would impact one's ability to appropriately parent. Allowing all mental health professionals without any of this training would create a disastrous environment in which people are performing evaluations and making recommendations without any research basis for their opinion.

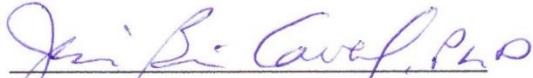
Bill 5505 also raises the issue of "dual relationships" if a mental health professional would be able to perform both therapy and evaluations with the same individual or within the same family. When a psychologist wears the hat of a therapist, the relationship is quite different than one of an evaluative nature. Within the American Psychological Association Ethics Code, there are requirements that psychologists do everything possible to avoid this type of dual relationship. Bill 5505 opens the door to dual relationships which would ultimately call into question the integrity of Court evaluations. Current evaluators understand the need for maintaining an evaluative relationship and do not perform therapy with individuals they are evaluating, instead making recommendations for therapy as appropriate to other clinicians.

Bill 5505 also makes significant changes to full Court-ordered child custody evaluations. In the current environment, the same psychologist evaluates both parents and all of the children in a family. The research in the area supports one psychologist evaluating all members of the family so that the end result are coordinated opinions about how the family is functioning. However, Bill 5505 would allow each parent to choose their own evaluator as well as separate evaluators for each child. This would result in a number of reports being presented to the Court with likely contradictory recommendations, proving these evaluations to then be useless for the Court in making custody recommendations. To continue the integrity of the child custody evaluation, it is imperative that the evaluations continue to be conducted by one psychologist who can assess the entire family system.

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Therefore, I do not support Bill 5505 and I ask that the Judiciary Committee question the purpose of the Bill and how it will negatively impact the current Court system in Connecticut.



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