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In Re: HB5505

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am writing you with regard to HB 5505, which you will be considering on March 11, 2015. In my opinion this is a poorly conceived bill, which should not ever be brought to a vote in the House. It will hurt children, and the people who strive to help them, and is bound to create chaos in the court.

First, it limits the judges' ability to supervised visitation to just a few narrow circumstances. This means that children will find themselves in a variety of unhealthy, unsafe, and unsavory situations with parents who have a track record of bad judgment. Many parents, who are neither abusive nor mentally ill, need supervision in order to learn how to become good parents. There are many varieties of bad parenting, all of which can be harmful to children, which would be ignored if this bill were to be passed. The court needs broad powers to protect children.

Secondly, this bill grants dissatisfied parents the right to sue GALs and AMCs if they do not like the decisions that these professionals have come to. On a practical level, no one will want to continue to work on behalf of children if they run the risk of being sued by every unhappy parent. Moreover, we could hardly expect these professionals to do their jobs thoroughly or thoughtfully if they are worried about lawsuits every time they make a parent unhappy. This ultimately hurts children, by biasing decisions towards CYA for the professional rather than doing what is right for the child.

This bill also puts the matter of choice of treating and evaluating professionals in the hands of parents, rather than in the hands of the court. While it might seem like a good idea to get away from perceived clubbiness of court-appointed professionals, there is an excellent reason why we have developed the system we have, namely that there are only a limited number of professionals in our state who have the forensic experience and training to do evaluations for the court. Were you to ask any other licensed professional, you would likely get the opinion you pay for. Professionals who are unfamiliar with custody issues will not know what is normative and what is unacceptable parenting from a custody perspective, and so they are likely to vouch for whomever is paying them. It is far preferable to have one neutral professional, who is experienced in making these tough decisions, evaluate both parents and their relationships with the children comprehensively, rather than to set up battles of one so-called expert against another.

Finally, this bill takes away the conduit role of the GAL, in terms of communications with therapists and doctors. What a disaster would result were this to be passed! First, it would sabotage the confidentiality of therapy, which is the most essential ingredient in its effectiveness. No one would feel free talking to a therapist if they knew that person were going to be divulging sensitive material in court, and frankly, no therapist would want to participate in treatment of any child who had ongoing legal issues. The result is

either that time and money would be wasted in requiring the professionals to come to court, or worse, the children who most need help would be unable to find it. As psychologists, we have ethical standards, and we will not be willing to do bogus treatment for children with genuine needs.

I trust that the committee will be thoughtful about this bill, and will vote to reject it.

Thank you.

Abby Golomb Cole, Ph.D.