

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

For the last ten years, I have had the pleasure to act in the capacity as a Guardian Ad Litem for many children that reside in Connecticut. As a Guardian Ad Litem, I have represented the best interests of children in family, juvenile, criminal, and probate proceedings. The ages of my wards have spanned from days old to beyond their eighteenth birthday. The children that I have gotten to know come from diverse backgrounds and bring different perspectives to each case. Despite the unique fact pattern in each case, as a Guardian Ad Litem you must be prepared to answer the same question at the conclusion of each case, "What is in the best interest of the minor child(ren)?" It is an answer that you cannot reach lightly and it is not a conclusion that you can be rushed into making. A harsh and quick recommendation will only hurt your ward or wards in the end. It is clear that the authors of House Bill 5055 are attempting to shift the focus away from the children caught in these legal battles and it is a sentiment that I do not support.

The proposed bill calls for the Guardian Ad Litem to testify at the beginning and/or conclusion of the hearing in order to lower the legal fees that the parents may be responsible for at the conclusion of a hearing. The requested change in the Guardian Ad Litem's attendance is putting the interest of the parents' wallets in front of what should be their utmost priority, the best interest of their children. Engrained in the brains of any Guardian Ad Litem is that a conclusion should not be reached as to what is in the best interest of your ward(s) until all testimony and evidence has concluded and been submitted, respectively. If codified in the statutes, House Bill 5055 will force Guardian Ad Litem to make decisions without all the facts. How is that serving our ward(s)? Are the drafters stating that it is more important for the parents to limit their exposure to legal fees than it is for the Guardian Ad Litem to hear all relevant facts from both parents? Parties will intentionally request that the Guardian Ad Litem testify first and foremost as a tactic to prevent the Guardian Ad Litem from reviewing evidence and/or hearing testimony that they deem unfavorable to their position. If the goal with the proposed legislation is to hold Guardian Ad Litem more accountable in their actions and/or recommendations, the drafters have missed the mark.

Although this proposed legislation is littered with alarming concepts, a second provision that I would like to highlight for the committee is allowing the parents the opportunity to select their own mental health evaluators. The purpose of the mental health and/or substance abuse evaluation is for a professional with the proper credentials to assess whether or not that parents suffer from an illness and/or diagnosis that impairs their ability to raise children. The resulting reports are

helpful resource tools that are utilized by the Guardian Ad Litem, Family Relations Officers, and the Judges in determining what is a fair and appropriate parenting plan that is the best interest of the minor children. Granting permission to the parents to choose their own mental health evaluators will strip the safeguard of having the evaluator be a neutral and independent party. Instead, the parents will be choosing evaluators that may be predisposed as a result of having treated the parents in the past and any report that may be furnished as a result will be assessed very little weight by all the Judges assigned to hear family matters. Further if you play out the scenario that is described in §§3(a), 3(b) of this proposed legislation, it is quite possible that it will take up to three (3) court appearances in order to choose an evaluator. These potential additional court appearances will increase the costs of litigation, which, at face value, contradicts the rationale behind the other provisions of House Bill 5055 and, in my experience are likely to occur.

As a mentor once explained to me in the beginning of my career, if your goal is to make the parents happy at the conclusion of the case, then you have not done your job well. Serving as a Guardian Ad Litem is not an easy role and one that often goes unappreciated. If you serve in this capacity, at the end of the day you need to be able to say confidently that the recommendations you have set forth to the Court are in the best interest of your ward(s) without feeling the constant threat of grievances and further legal action from the parents. If the true intent behind the introduction of House Bill 5055 was to curb the extracted lengths of time that these families are spending in Courtrooms, I would respectfully request that the individuals instrumental in drafting House Bill 5055 reevaluate their approach. Instead of attacking Guardian Ad Litem and mental health providers that assist in family proceedings, spend your time more productively. Talk to Guardian Ad Litem and mental health providers that are embroiled in these battles day in and day out. If you want to ensure that the selection of the mental health evaluator is done fairly and judiciously, adopt the standards set forth by the Juvenile Court. If you want to raise the level of professionalism of those serving in the capacity of Guardian Ad Litem, require mandatory trainings each year. Do the opposite of what you are doing now.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read my written testimony in response to the proposed House Bill 5055 that has been submitted for your review and consideration. As stated above and for the reasons that I have explained, I do not support the passing of House Bill 5055.

Very truly yours,

*Rebecca Mayo Goodrich* (RL)

Rebecca Mayo Goodrich