



Elizabeth S. Thayer, Ph.D.
Partner

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Senator Gerratana, Representative Ritter and Members of the Public Health Committee:

I am writing to you concerning HB6267 proposed by Representative Srinivasan. I am a licensed psychologist in the State of Connecticut and Partner in Beacon Behavioral Services LLC. I also served on the Board of Examiners in Psychology in Connecticut for 16 years from November 1992 to December 2008 and served on the Task Force to Study Legal Disputes Involving the Care and Custody of Minor Children in 2013-2014. I have coauthored two books entitled *The Co-Parenting Survival Guide* and *Adult Children of Divorce*. I am the founder of The PEACE Program which is a nationally recognized program for co-parent counseling and has served thousands of parents since its inception in 1998. I am not a custody evaluator but have read hundreds of evaluations and worked with a large number of the custody evaluators in Connecticut.

I am strongly opposed to HB6267 for the following reasons:

1. The number of parents whose disputes over their children result in custody evaluations is small in comparison to those who settle their disputes without significant legal intervention. As a psychologist who works to provide alternative dispute interventions to families and minimize significant parental conflict for children I know that when an evaluation is requested it is mainly for issues that are of a serious nature and/or result from entrenched conflict which is not amenable to all the other intervention methods available.
2. As a member of the Board of Examiners in Psychology and one who attended numerous hearings and signed many consent orders not one was concerning transgressions by custody evaluators. That is not to say that those complaints do not occur but they have not been substantiated and therefore not brought to the attention of the Board by DPH.
3. It is important to remember that the Board of Examiners in Psychology is a volunteer board without specifically designated funding. Although the licensing fees for Psychologists in Connecticut are among the highest in the nation, it all goes into the General Fund. Therefore the time frame for hearings and consent orders is slower than anyone would like. This is not because of collusion between DPH and the Psychologists and the Family Court. It is purely a matter of funding and time and resources.
4. In all professions a review of possible ethical violations is conducted by peers. This occurs in hospitals, in the legal profession, in corporations, etc. This is precisely because someone trained in the same profession has the knowledge to determine whether or not a violation has taken place. I would not believe I am best suited to read a medical evaluation but I have the training to determine if a psychologist has violated The American Psychological Association's Ethical Standards.

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5. The difficulty in finding peer reviewers in Connecticut is also partly financial and again results in a lack of voluntary reviewers. The Connecticut Psychological Association and the Board of Examiners in Psychological along with DPH has tried time and again to address this to no avail. This is NOT the result of collusion between DPH and the psychologists but again the logical conclusion to a lack of resources.
6. Please also remember that when a complaint is filed against the license of a psychologist the process then begins to involve an extraordinary amount of time, energy and finances. IF the complaint is warranted then of course that is justified (as in most of the cases actually brought to a hearing by the Board) BUT if the complaint is not justified then it can be financially and personally devastating for the psychologist. Unfortunately that is currently the case and is resulting in exceptional psychologists deciding no longer to conduct custody evaluations or to work in the forensic field of divorce and custody. That is a professional tragedy!!

Disputed custody matters are in and of themselves inherently fraught with an overwhelming sense of fear and loss as parents "battle" in the legal system for the right to see their children and make decisions for them. They are coping with the demise of their marriage, substantial changes in finances, an assault to their own self esteem, fear of an unknown future, and fear that their children will be forever affected by the changes in their family. They are never pleased with the results of an evaluation if it does not go in their favor. To them the person who seems the most responsible for their hurt and anger would naturally be the custody evaluator and/or maybe their lawyer or the Guardian Ad Litem. Thus a complaint and/or grievance is filed and the process begins for the professional. A professional who was asked to do a next to impossible job, did it abiding with their training and their ethical standards and is now fighting for his/her own professional life for no substantiated reason.

7. In my capacity as a psychologist seeing parents for co-parent counseling pre- and post-divorce I have reviewed hundreds of custody evaluations and they have all conformed to the very stringent standard prepared by the American Psychological Association. The training required to achieve the specialization of becoming a custody evaluator is very rigorous and the standards required are the same. In addition all psychologists adhere to the Ethical Standards for Psychologists also determined by the American Psychological Association. That is why the Board has not seen cases concerning violations of conduct in a custody evaluation rise to the level of a hearing or consent order.

Therefore I strongly oppose HB6267 as it will not serve the purpose it seems to recommend. In fact it will do the opposite and enhance the misrepresentations being made about the supposed collusion and bias of DPH, the Board of Examiners in Psychology, DPH, and the esteemed licensed psychologists in the State of Connecticut.

Sincerely,

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