

The Connecticut General Assembly

Task Force To Study Legal Disputes Involving the Care and Custody of Minor Children

Co-Chairs:

Sue Cousineau, Esq.

Sharon Wicks Dornfeld, Esq.



c/o Judiciary Committee, Room 2500
Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

Email: LDCC@cga.ct.gov

DRAFT

Minutes

Thursday, November 26, 2013

Room 2B

Attendance: Chairperson Sue Cousineau, Esq., Chairperson Sharon Wicks Dornfeld, Esq., Joseph J. DiTunno, Representative Minnie Gonzalez, Jennifer Verraneault, Thomas Weissmuller, Esq., Linda Allard, Esq., Elizabeth Thayer, PhD., Keith Roeder, PsyD., Robert Horwitz, PhD.

Protocol: The meeting was called to order at 10:00am. Chairperson Cousineau advised those in attendance of the emergency evacuation procedures for hearing room 2B.

Introduction: For the benefit of the members who could not attend the last meeting and the public, each member was introduced and explained his/her background. Chairperson Dornfeld made known the room assignments for future meetings, the proper email address for testimony submissions, that all testimony will be posted, and once posted that all testimony is public and final. Chairperson Cousineau made it known that the hearing will be televised. Dr. Robert Horwitz was introduced as the new member appointed by the Minority Leader of the House.

Minutes of the November 26, 2013 meeting:

- Attorney Dornfeld made a motion to accept the minutes from the previous meeting. The motion was seconded, no objections were made, and the motion was accepted.
- Attorney Dornfeld mentioned that law students are compiling relevant information to this Task Force on the statutes in all 50 states.
- Attorney Cousineau introduced Dr. Keith Roeder who offered his expert testimony before the task force on the subject of parental gatekeeping.

Dr. Keith Roeder Psy.D, Instructor, Parenting Education Program, Roeder & Polansky

Dr. Roeder identified four reasons for healthy child development: low parental conflict, high parental cooperation, ongoing relationships with both parents, and parental encouragement of the child's relationship with the other parent. He concluded that these conditions can be met in divorced households; however, time and access between child and parent are often restricted by divorce and separation. The theme of "time and access" was repeated by Dr. Roeder as being the key to fulfilling his four reasons that contribute to healthy child development. In his testimony, Dr. Roeder mentioned:

- The evolution of the family environment over the last 60 years
- The increase in divorce
- Most problems in child development find their root in family and parental conflict.
- Parental conflict predates the rise of divorce.

- Divorce is not necessarily a precursor to conflict.
- Distance and lack of contact with a parent can lead to low self-esteem, which is the root cause of hopelessness and depression in children.
- Studies performed in the 1950s support the notion that children are best raised by a mother and father.
- Divorce often causes problems with child development since it upsets the mother-father dynamic, and makes child care more difficult.
- Child development amid conflict is an issue that society needs to address.

Discussion:

- Attorney Cousineau recognized that there was widespread consensus on Dr. Roeder's testimony, and asked if Dr. Roeder had any recommendations regarding parents who resist early intervention.
- Dr. Roeder maintained that the situations are often delicate and deference must be paid to the psychology of the parents; however, action may be required for the welfare of the child.
- Ms. Verraneault critiqued the complexity of the judicial and mental health systems and indicated that certain persons profit unfairly from the bureaucracy.
- Dr. Thayer defended certain aspects of the system. In particular, she argued that GALs move the process forward. She also indicated the importance of remaining cognizant of the stress of the divorce scenario.
- Attorney Weissmuller asked Dr. Roeder for a price range he charges for his work, court appointed and private practice.
- Vigorous discussion ensued regarding the appropriateness and relevance of that question.
- Representative Gonzalez indicated that courts and justices appoint certain doctors for cases; Ms. Verraneault concurred.
- Attorney Dornfeld questioned the accurateness of Representative Gonzalez' claim.
- Dr. Thayer put forward the idea that the task force's purpose is to solve problems and fix a broken system.
- Attorney Weissmuller repeated his question regarding Dr. Roeder's price range and billing practices.
- Dr. Roeder indicated that price is only one aspect of a larger picture.
- Attorney Dornfeld redirected the conversation toward the topic of gatekeeping. She raised the issue of gatekeeping for families with never-married parents and asked Dr. Roeder if the same issues regarding parental access apply to them and also to same-sex couples.
- Dr. Roeder acknowledged that cases involving families that were never-married are on the rise and those cases generally involve significant animosity between parents. He also indicated he did not have enough experience dealing with same-sex parents to give a professional opinion.
- Mr. DiTunno asked Dr. Roeder what is the statistical occurrence of extreme alienation. Attorney Allard asked questions regarding Dr. Roeder's research.
- Dr. Roeder acknowledged his inability to provide statistics, but maintained that early intervention and parental participation are vital to preventing extreme alienation.
- Different states' procedures were briefly discussed; Attorney Dornfeld indicated the preference for the term "access" as opposed to "custody" in Connecticut.
- Representative Gonzalez and Ms. Verraneault asked Dr. Roeder if he considers alienation a form of child abuse.

- Dr. Roeder maintained that alienation is a problem for society.
- There was general consensus that lack of parent access, no matter its causes, is damaging to child development.

Timeline & Scheduling:

- The next meeting of the task force is scheduled to be held on December 10, 2013, in room 2B.

Motion was made to adjourn the meeting by Chairperson Cousineau and seconded by Chairperson Dornfeld. Meeting adjourned at 12:00pm.