

Good morning/afternoon members of the Task Force

My name is Scott Buden. My wife Colleen Buden was punished by the courts due to the lack of due diligence and professional ethics on the part of the GAL and the family court system as a whole. My step-children only get to spend 6 days a month with their mom, after living with her 80 to 90% of the time until the ages of 11 and 9. The Judges decision was largely based on the recommendations of the GAL.

The fate of my step-children was left to a Children's Law Center GAL, Parul Patel, a newly graduated attorney, not a licensed mental health professional. GAL Patel aligned herself with the father instead of aligning herself with the children. She neglected to represent the children's best interest and refused to follow-up on the concerns my wife presented to her.

My family was subjected to a Custodial Evaluation conducted by Dr. Stephanie Stein Leite, a psychologist recommended by GAL Patel. We requested another evaluator when we found out that the GAL was in constant communication with Dr. Stein Leite, prior to the evaluation. We were concerned that the potential bias of the GAL would unduly influence the evaluator. Judge Wetstone denied our request.

The final evaluation was critiqued by a highly-respected evaluator, Dr. Hiebel, who has over 30 years of experience. Dr. Hiebel, found no issues that would affect my wife's ability to parent. In his critique I quote "Dr. Stein-Leite did not let the clinical test results alter her mind set, it appears, and she seemed to have ignored conflicting evidence as to what she might have thought about these individuals prior to her examination." Dr. Hiebel recommended that the court conduct a more accurate evaluation but was not allowed by Judge Wetstone to testify as to his findings.

The mishandling of my wife's case continues. Judge Wetstone also found that the sharing of her ex-husbands "Gun Permit Denial Letters" to a third party were, and I quote "vile and interfering" and stated in her orders that my wife was being punished because of it. These letters are in the public domain. They are documents issued by a public agency, documents available to any person under the state freedom of information laws. Imagine losing time with your children for sharing something as public as a phone book? My wife did.

In addition, Judge Wetstone ordered that the current High Conflict Counselor, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist along with being a prior Attorney, be replaced. According to the Judge, she stated “the Court was absolutely appalled to hear there was a suggestion that the daughter be brought into the co-parenting counseling.” But this is common practice of Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, they bring families together in counseling to work through the problems in the family system.

Per the GAL’s recommendation, Judge Wetstone ordered Andy Hechtman, an unlicensed college undergraduate who rented space from the same law firm GAL Patel was employed by and charged more per hour than the Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Why is a college student charging more than a seasoned and licensed Mental Health Professional, and why is an unlicensed student recommended by the GAL, ~~in this case a state employee~~, then mandated by the judge. Is this in anyone's best interest?

I believe one of the major issues with the GAL program in CT is that the majority of these GAL’s are lawyers rather than mental health professionals who are trained in marriage and family therapy.

The GAL synthesizes information from experts, children and parents, or in some cases investigates and makes recommendations to the court without experts involved at all. When the GAL provides information to the court there is a danger that her findings can be accepted as facts. This can result in damage to either parent, and result in costly attorney’s fees in an effort to restore parental rights, for example visitation.

If our state adopted a program like that of Massachusetts where the GALs need to have a mental health background, fewer families would be going through what my family is living with every day.

Additionally, Judge Wetstone is an AFCC Director and all the court-appointed professionals on this case were also AFCC members.

Thank you for your time.