FORENSIC COUNSELING SERVICES

Aaron Robb, Ph.D., LPC-S
Program Director

Mailing address:
2831 Eldorado Pkwy, Ste. 103-377, Frisco, TX 75033

Telephone: 972-360-7437
www.texascounseling.org

The 18-week evaluation

Program and Requirements and Procedures

The largest challenge in completing child custody evaluations are delays on the part of litigants, who sometimes wait months before even sending our office appointment orders. Setting clear expectations can establish benchmarks to keep an evaluation on track and move cases towards resolution in a timely manner. We have established this program to provide litigants who are committed to resolving their litigation in a timely fashion an evaluation and report process that meets their needs.

- Preparation

The first step comes with attorneys, *prior to a hearing requesting our appointment*, verifying that the evaluator is available to take on a case with a fixed deadline. Assigning a case to an evaluator who is scheduled for three trial appearances and a deposition in the next two months may lead to delays, as does assigning cases to evaluators who are already at capacity. Please do not wait until the day of the hearing to check – if we are with clients all day, we may not be able to respond immediately.

- Appointment orders

The appointment order must contain the language from our sample order requiring the parents to participate, provide documentation, and pay their retainers by certain deadlines. If parents are not clear that they will be held accountable for timely participation, there is often little evaluators can do to move the process along. Each parent's ability to comply with the process, including the ability to timely pay for services, must be established before proceeding.

- What happens next?

Our standard order gives parents 5 business days to complete intake paperwork after the signing of the order. It is easy for clients to download intake paperwork from our web site, and it really should take them less than 24 hours to complete it and send it to us. Once we receive intake forms from all parties, we will schedule initial interviews, generally within the next week.

In an ideal world, the parents will be interviewed on a weekly basis for the next month and immediately after adult interviews are completed, we will conduct home visits. During the home visits we will observe family interaction and interview each of the children individually in each of the parents' respective homes. Even if there are minor scheduling difficulties, within

the first ten weeks all interaction with the family should be completed with the report to follow.

- The fine print

Not every parent can take off half a day every week (between interview time and travel to our offices) for a month. As evaluators we are in a difficult position to judge which parents *can't* take time off for regularly scheduled interviews and those who simply *won't*. If we are appointed to do an 18-week evaluation and a parent drags their feet, please expect that we will notify the court and possibly not make our deadline due to this kind of delay. Appointments may also not be as convenient for parents as they will have to accommodate the evaluator's schedule, and the parents should confirm their understanding of this requirement in advance of expedited services being discussed with the evaluator.

We must have intake documentation from every member of the family in the household as the Family Code requires us to do basic interviews and background checks with all adults in each household. Especially when dealing with stepparents, it is far easier to begin the initial interview with all adults in the household. Roommates, significant others, grandparents, and all other adults living in a household must be included in observation that occurs at the home visit as well; if they drag their feet on participation, turnaround time suffers.

Our timeframes only take into account actual working days; especially around the Thanksgiving and winter holiday seasons expect some disruption in our ability to schedule and complete reports due to the time off to be with our own families.

One of the ways in which forensic professionals maintain neutrality and ethical practice is by assuring that payment is not contingent on a particular recommendation or outcome. As such all fees for services are due in advance. Some families may not be able to immediately provide retainer payments immediately and may be a poor fit for this process (or alternatively may need to wait on seeking an appointment order until they are able to afford the initial retainer).

In addition, some cases may not be appropriate for an 18-week evaluation commitment, particularly if they will involve travel, profoundly complicated legal or psycho-social issues, or an extensive number of critical professional collateral contacts.

- Why don't you always schedule like this?

Most of our staff have other clinical commitments, and traditionally we have integrated evaluations into our broader work. This means taking the dedicated time to integrate extensive interviews with collateral records, requiring a large chunk of time from our schedules. The 18-week evaluation reflects a commitment on the part of our staff to dedicate a larger portion of their practice to court-connected work in order to be able to provide focus. This is part of where our limitations on the number of cases we take comes in as well, as we want to make sure to not overcommit. Our hope is we can make this time frame routine on most cases and invite your feedback as we work toward this goal.