

## Memorandum in Opposition

### COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND THE LAW

Children #2

May 23, 2017

S. 6300

By: Senator Avella

A. 1533

By: M. of A. Weinstein

Senate Committee: Children and Families

Assembly Committee: Codes

Effective Date: 90<sup>th</sup> day after it shall have become a law

**AN ACT** to amend the domestic relations law and the family court act, in relation to child custody forensic reports.

**LAW AND SECTIONS REFERRED TO:** Sections 70, 241 of the domestic relations law; section 251, 651 of the family court act.

### THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND THE LAW OPPOSES THIS LEGISLATION

Up until approximately thirty years ago, parents in custody cases who could afford to hire expert witnesses often hired mental health professionals to testify concerning their views regarding which custody/visitation arrangements would be in the best interests of children. Although these "battles of the experts" still exist in many states, in New York it has become common for judges to appoint so-called "neutral" mental health professionals to provide custody evaluations.

Because most issues concerning custody evaluations have not been addressed by statute or court rule, individual courts and individual judges have been forced to determine on their own what practices they will follow concerning many complex questions. Consequently, New York State is a patchwork of different and sometimes contradictory practices.

This Bill would give the litigants, their counsel, if any, and the attorney for the child in child custody and visitation cases the right to obtain a copy of the forensic report and the underlying data. In addition, this Bill would enable a party to provide a copy of the forensic report and the underlying data to professionals retained to help with the case, including e.g. an expert to rebut the contents of a forensic report. At each step, the court would have the ability to issue a protective order limiting or conditioning access to the forensic report or the evaluator's file. In addition, the court would have the authority to hold violators of their court orders directing such limitations or conditions in contempt of

court. The court would also be required to provide clear notice to the parties and counsel that a violation of a court order conditioning or limiting disclosure shall be contempt of court which may include punishment of a fine or imprisonment or both. The Bill also would provide that the admissibility into evidence of the forensic report must be subject to the rules of evidence and the right of cross-examination.

The New York State Bar Association Committee on Children and the Law has grave concerns regarding the Bill as it fails to prevent litigants from receiving a copy of the forensic report to take out of the court. The Bill is not sufficiently protective of children. The Committee's primary concern is the opportunity for both willful and inadvertent revelation of the frequently adverse information regarding a parent to a child who is the subject of a custody proceeding. Despite the ability of the court to hold a willful violator in contempt in the Bill, at the point of an application for contempt, the damage is already done to the child at a time when he or she is already dealing with the stress of a divorce or separation between his or her parents. The Committee supports the need to provide much needed structure to this process. However, to require the court to determine whether a protective order is necessary to safeguard the report and underlying information from misuse on a case-by-case basis will not provide uniformity, but will foster continued uncertainty. Children are often cannon fodder in bitter custody disputes. The Bill should be amended to provide the uniformity needed to protect children from misuse of this delicate information before the harm occurs, by restricting litigant access to forensic reports to access supervised by the litigant's attorney or at the court with supervision that makes certain there is no access to any type of copying machine or device, including a cell phone that could be used to photograph a report. If the litigant is pro se and reads the report in the court, the litigant should have his or her own copy of the report, which will be kept at the court, so that the litigant can make notes on the report and can use his or her own copy of the report at trial. The Committee on Children and the Law believes that without amendment, children will be exposed to harm occasioned by the misuse of such information.

Based on the foregoing, the New York State Bar Association's Committee on Children and the Law **OPPOSES** this legislation.