

My name is Mary McNeish Stengel and I am a licensed clinical social worker who has worked for the court as an employee and a contractor for 15 years.

Although I am here to speak to you today in opposition to Senate Bill 365/House Bill 405 and about what we do as custody evaluators, I am impressed with the dedication the supporters of this bill have to the welfare of children and families in these difficult cases.

As mental health professionals, not lawyers, the last thing any of us want to do is to do the work without the training needed to be able to defend our work in a court room. Rather, we want to have as much training specific to forensic evaluations, which, like it or not, these evaluations are. As a result, we take training related to how to perform custody evaluations. That training by its nature, includes maintaining a constant awareness of the interplay between clinical issues and their impact on the family. Those clinical issues include child abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, domestic violence, parent/child refusal. And we also have to understand the impact of any kind of conflict on children at different developmental stages.

In many jurisdictions, evaluations are ordered in cases where the parties have no counsel and the court needs a neutral picture of what is happening in the

family. The average evaluation takes 40 hours to complete. We are required to interview both parents and their partners, interview all the children, observe the parents with all the children and observe the families in their home environments. We are also responsible for interviewing and observing other family members who live in the home, but are not parties to the case. We review academic and attendance records, medical, dental, and mental health records of children, when allowed, Child Protective Services records, and police records as well as the entire court file. We review similar records for the parents in the case. We are also required to speak to collateral contacts provided by the parents. We then have to write a report, incorporating all the information collected and have it completed, usually within 30-45 days of starting the case. We put our personal safety at risk by going into the homes of families who are understandably hostile about us intruding into their private matters. In many courts an evaluator starting salary is \$65,000.00. This work is not for the faint of heart. I have yet to meet a court evaluator who is doing it for the glamor and the glory it involves. Rather it is done with a deep sense of the responsibility and commitment to the welfare of the children and families we serve.