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## Parenting coordinators focus on children

**P**arenting coordination is a relatively new form of dispute resolution available for high conflict divorce matters. In an effort to reduce the amount of post-decree litigation, the court may appoint a parenting coordinator.

The parties also may choose to involve a parenting coordinator by agreement. The minimum qualifications for a parenting coordinator in Cook County require that the person possess a master's degree in social work, psychology or counseling or a law degree and have at least five years' experience in mediation, mental health or a related field. The parenting coordinator must also attend an approved 40-hour mediation training course.

Once a problem arises between a couple, both parties submit their issue to the parenting coordinator, who will create a final solution for the disagreement. In many ways the parent coordinator will act as a binding arbitrator of minor disputes.

The court may appoint a parenting coordinator to a case when (1) the parties failed to adequately cooperate and communicate with regard to issues involving their children; (2) mediation has been unsuccessful or is inappropriate for the matter; or (3) the appointment of the parenting coordinator is in the best interests of the children.

A parenting coordinator differs from a mediator in that the coordinator can decide and impose a solution to a dispute for the parties. The parenting coordinator also is not bound by the rules of confidentiality and may be called as a witness to describe to the court what has been going on between the parties. The

parenting coordinator often reports to the judge whether the parties have not been complying with the court's orders.

Former judge Barbara Ann Riley works as a lawyer in private practice and for the past three years has worked as a parenting coordinator.

In every case she has been appointed by the court, Riley said she felt drawn to the work of alternative dispute resolution partly from her experience on the bench: "I have known for a long time that the courts cannot really address the needs of litigants. In many ways, the legal process can hurt them more than they already are."

As a parenting coordinator, Riley plays an important role resolving disputes between her clients in an effort to keep them out of court. "Prior to working as a parenting coordinator, I did not think that I had a tolerance for high-conflict situations, but I have really surprised myself." Riley believes that her experience as an adolescent psychiatric nurse also helps her deal with the issues that arise between the parties and their parenting schedules.

Her main concern throughout the process is to protect the children.

The time a parenting coordinator spends on each case differs depending on the needs of the parties. For Riley, there is no such thing as a typical day. "The issues rarely arise between 9 and 5. It can be very hard to predict how much time you will spend working on a case. Everything can be going along pretty well, and then all of a sudden I will get texts at 7 in the morning and then again that night."

Riley also finds she is utilized differently by different parties. "I may not hear from one couple

### COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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for a few months, and then for some couples, I speak to either party almost every day."

Through her experience, Riley believes that a parenting coordinator is most effective when he or she has a relationship with both parties. The couple must work to communicate honestly and openly with the parenting coordinator. "In many ways, the simple fact that I listen to each person is what makes my role so effective.

"One power that I have, besides having a relationship with them, is that they know if they wind up back in court, the judge is going to listen to me," she explained.

Riley finds her position as a parenting coordinator different from her prior role as a judge and even different from her work as an attorney. "I find the role to be very creative. I get to use parts of myself that I could not use in other situations. I could never be this frank when I was a judge."

A parenting coordinator can have broad powers. The parenting coordinator may speak with the children's therapists, coaches and teachers.

Ideally, a parenting coordi-

nator is not utilized indefinitely. In many ways the role of the parenting coordinator is to help calm matters down between the parties and then, slowly, the need for the parenting coordinator should dwindle. "If I can get the parties to sign on to lowering the stress of their lives, then my role can be very effective. Nowhere else will they be able to get this type of immediate response to their issues."

As more courts begin to search for ways to relieve the volume of cases on their dockets, the use of the parenting coordinator may increase in popularity requiring parties going through the process of divorce to inform themselves about the role.

Judge Charles Reynard in downstate McLean County has worked diligently to dissuade litigating parents from the notion that the judge has the mystical insight necessary to solve their parenting issues.

"In my experience, since we enacted a parenting coordinator rule similar to the Cook County rule in January 2013, parents rarely file objections seeking court review of the parenting coordinator's recommendations," Reynard noted. "It suggests that what they needed most was someone to hear their concerns. In a quasi-judicial manner, the parenting coordinator makes a recommendation concerning a resolution on a more prompt basis than judges are able to furnish."

Reynard said he believes that the appointment of a parenting coordinator helps the parents develop better communication skills. "This is not just lightening court loads on judges. It is about meeting the children's need to be free from the relentless negativity of their parents who are at war in the courts."