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## FORENSIC COUNSELING SERVICES

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Dear parent,

We have been appointed by the Court to serve as Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) for your child or children. This means that the court has asked us, as mental health professionals experienced in forensic matters, to assist in making determinations as to what future plans may be in the best interests of your child or children. To that end your cooperation is necessary in providing information that will help in understanding you and your family and this letter is intended to help inform you of what will be needed.

The role of a GAL is as an advocate for your child or children rather than as a partisan in the dispute between the parties. We will try to answer any questions you have regarding our role and process but we will refer you back to your attorney to cover any legal or additional questions. We will attempt to have substantially similar contact with you and the other parties, as well as with each of the attorneys involved, but our role may necessitate that we spend more time with one or the other of the parties or their attorneys. The ultimate goal is to provide as informed an opinion as possible to the court in regards to the specific questions leading up to our appointment in this case.

We make a special effort to put children at ease and minimize disruption in their lives. You may help prepare them for our sessions together by letting them know we work with parents to help them make decisions about how to take care of children. You can also say that we will need to talk to them about their thoughts and feelings about their lives so we can help you with your decisions. Please do **not** tell children we are to decide where they will primarily live – this is both incorrect and places an inappropriate burden on children that they must somehow choose who they want to live with. Children will generally not be asked with whom they want to live or which parent they like better. Our goal is to provide the court information on how each parent contributes to the physical, emotional and social development of the child or children in question, and to make **recommendations** to the court as to what appears to be in the children's best interests. It is ultimately up to parents to make decisions for their children, even if that decision is to place parenting issues before the court.

Information about fees and the retainer for services is detailed on the enclosed advisement form. In an effort to maintain an impartial role during the process the retainer is due in advance of beginning work on the case. We will schedule our first appointment together after we receive your completed advisement form and initial payment. We may schedule subsequent appointments together to see both you and your children. It is important in order to complete this process in a timely manner that you notify us as soon as possible any time an appointment needs

to be changed or rescheduled. Throughout this process you must assume responsibility for keeping us informed any time there are issues or potential problems.

If for some reason you believe we may have interacted in the past, or that we may have previously provided services or otherwise been involved with anyone in this case please inform us of this immediately. We attempt to prevent even the appearance of any possible conflicts of interest, however our staff have been in practice, both privately and at various agencies, for decades and cannot guarantee we remember every person we may have had contact with in that time. We may have been professionally involved in previous cases with one or more of the attorneys in this case, just as they may have been involved with each other in previous cases. If we become aware of any conflicts of interest that may impact on our ability to serve as GAL we will disclose those to you and to the court.

The number one thing that you can do to help yourself during this process is to be honest and cooperative. Any dishonest or inaccurate information that you report will only hurt you. Clearly, as in any occasion where people are not in agreement, you and the other parent may have different perceptions of events. This is understandable and something to be expected in a child custody dispute. However we will attempt to verify, to the extent possible, statements of fact that are pertinent to the issues at hand. As part of this process each of the parents are asked to voice their concerns regarding the other parent, and respond to that parent's concerns regarding them. Any untrue or inaccurate information is likely to be challenged by the other parent.

Along these same lines, please do not expect us to be mind readers or otherwise guess at your needs or concerns during this process. You will be best served by communicating openly with us so that we may make as accurate an assessment as possible. While it is unlikely that you and the appointed GAL will share the same beliefs about all issues, our beliefs are not the important issue – the important issue is how both of the parents' beliefs, lifestyles, and other factors interact and affect the children in question. There are many different parenting styles and techniques that have varying levels of success with different children. What is important is how your parenting and the other party's parenting effect the *specific* child or children in question in your case.

In order to expedite the process, you are asked to please complete the following paperwork tasks:

- Read and sign/complete the enclosed advisement form, data form, and Acknowledgement of Notice of Privacy Practices. If there are other adults living with you please make copies and have them complete the forms as well. It is important that you **fully complete** the requested information on the data form. Provide complete names, addresses, zip codes, and phone numbers of all persons listed on the form.
- Provide a written statement outlining your position (what you believe are the issues in the case and your proposed solutions) and contact information for persons you believe have direct knowledge of these issues (physicians, teachers, therapists, etc.).
- Obtain copies of each school aged child's report card for the current and previous school year.
- Return this information to us as soon as possible with your initial retainer. Please do not contact us by e-mail for case-related issues. Due to the nature of e-mail and "spam" filters

we cannot guarantee that we receive these contacts. Please mail or fax information to us or contact us by telephone if you have questions.

Often parents have information from other professionals that they have interacted with (doctors, teachers, law enforcement, etc.) that they feel is important to share. We will be requesting that you sign release of information forms so that we can obtain basic information from these types of professionals. In addition, parents are urged to provide clear copies of any information from these sources which they feel is relevant, but to provide *only* relevant information – it is not necessary to have a copy of every form or report that has ever been generated regarding the child or children in question.

Again, we do understand that this is a difficult process for parents to go through. With your cooperation and active participation it should be minimally disruptive for the child or children involved. We will take time at our initial appointment to further detail the process and what you can expect as you and your family goes through it. If you have any questions before that time that your attorney cannot answer please contact our office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aaron Robb". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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