

April 28, 2025

Rep. Jason Kropf, Chair
House Committee on Judiciary
900 Court Street, NE
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Support for SB 97 for domestic relations mediation funding

Chair Kropf, Vice-Chair Chotzen, Vice-Chair Wallan, Committee Members,

My name is Cliff Leonardi, and I'm a court-connected domestic relations mediator with over ten years of experience. I am here today in support of SB 97. I currently provide mediation for Family Resolution Services in Multnomah County. I have also worked with families in Tillamook, Clackamas and Washington County.

Mediation helps parents going through family transitions to have important conversations about a plan for their children. Specifically, we assist parents by facilitating a discussion to help them craft THEIR OWN parenting time arrangements, rather than having a court system impose a plan for them. The primary goal is to support children having safe and meaningful contact with BOTH parents.

Nearly 75% of the families we serve in Multnomah County are not represented by attorneys. This can be very challenging for parents who find themselves in unfamiliar territory, navigating high stakes family matters.

I recently heard a quote that trying to navigate the complexities of family court without a lawyer is like trying to play chess without knowing the rules. Attorneys know the rules, unrepresented parents are lost.

Mediation is an opportunity to avoid the formality and procedures of court. The meeting in its simplest form, is a conversation between the parents, with the support of a neutral facilitator.

I often validate parents that it is normal to retreat from communication and contact when you are hurt, anxious and experiencing conflict.

When I am checking with parents individually prior to mediation, they frequently tell me, "we try to talk, but we end up fighting, and I have to leave."

I assure them .. I hear that a lot. I see time and time again that when the conversation is structured and a neutral party is there, they tend to bring their better selves. Once they come

to mediation, they do better than they imagined they would. The focus slowly shifts from their anxiety and fear to a more problem solving approach.

As they gain momentum, they often have an “ah hah” moment and shift into seeing each other as co-parents, rather than ex-partners or adversaries. *This* is the magic of mediation.

I recently had a specific mediation that illustrates the opportunity for shifting the dynamics between parents.

A father called me and let me know that he had not seen his daughter for 4 years. There were no safety issues. Dad faded from his daughter's life to handle the struggles he was facing. He had experienced personal setbacks and the conflict between him and his child's mother had become chronic. She was not open to re-establishing parenting time for him.

When they first came to mediation, she said that “she does not even know you! If you think I'm going to allow my daughter to spend time with a complete stranger, you are kidding yourself.”

I asked her, what would make a difference for you to consider time for dad. She stated that it would need to be slow and it needed to be supervised.

On his own accord, Dad arranged for supervision. Twelve weekly, supervised day visits took place and they returned to mediation. They seemed completely different in this meeting.

Mom agreed to unsupervised visits and was open to overnights in the near future. They seemed at ease and playful with each other, joking about what they both observed in their daughters' growth and I asked Mom what had changed.

She said, “He heard what I needed and he just did it. For our daughters sake. That meant a lot to me and it makes me happy to see them together.”

In closing, it's important to highlight that Court connected mediation serves some of the most vulnerable and least resourced families in our communities. In my view, mediation is a vital tool that not only reduces court time, but it most importantly, minimizes the parental conflict that we know harms children.

Thank you for your time today.