

Mentor Mediators Impact Quality of Virginia Mediation

Virginia is one of only a handful of states that requires a mentorship in addition to training in order to be certified as a court-referred mediator. From approximately 1993 to 1997, individuals seeking certification had to observe and co-mediate cases with other certified mediators. Then in 1998, the OES implemented new Mentor requirements in order to ensure that those mediators working with new trainees had sufficient mediation experience and training in providing constructive feedback. Today there are 319 Virginia court-certified mediators who have been awarded Mentor status. To qualify, a mediator must have been recertified at least once, have participated in at least a two-hour course on Mentoring Others, and have completed an approved Application for Mentor Status.

The mentor is required to meet for at least thirty minutes with the mentee in pre-mediation planning and post-mediation debriefing. A Mentor is responsible for verifying that the trainee's training requirements necessary for the case to be mediated have been met, for planning the responsibilities of the trainee prior to the beginning of the mediation, and for identifying mediation skills the trainee would like to work on. Following the mediation, the Mentor must specifically discuss with the trainee things they did well, areas that could use improvement, and things that could have been done differently. The Mentor must answer questions the trainee has regarding any part of the process and provide the trainee with a completed evaluation form in a timely manner.

A Mentor must allow the mentee to play a major role in conducting at least the final co-mediation. The trainee must act as primary scrivener for at least one mediation memorandum and prospective family mediators must complete a child support worksheet.

The Department of Dispute Resolution Services relies very heavily on the information provided by the mentors in every Mentee Evaluation Form. Ideally, the OES would like the opportunity to observe and/or co-mediate with each candidate for certification. Due to limited resources, this is not possible and, as a result, Mentors in the field serve as an extension of the Department of Dispute Resolution Services. The decision to grant or deny certification is based in large part on the honest and detailed evaluation provided by the Mentors.

For this reason, it is the firm expectation of the DRS staff that each Mentor will take very seriously his or her responsibilities. **Every area on the Mentee Evaluation Form should be rated on the scale of 1 to 5 in addition to providing personal commentary on the lines provided. The numerical rating scale alone does not provide sufficient feedback to determine a candidate's readiness to receive certification.**

The Department of Dispute Resolution Services will contact the Mentor to request additional feedback and to discuss his or her understanding of the Mentor's

responsibilities if an evaluation form is incomplete. An honest, objective critique is expected for each co-mediation, whether it is the candidate's first or final case. It is also important to indicate which co-mediation is being evaluated for the mentee (Section II, Question 4). It is further expected that a Mentor will note on the evaluation that the mentee co-mediate additional cases beyond the minimum requirement if it is believed the mentee is not yet ready to receive certification to mediate on their own. **It should be kept in mind that the requirement of 5 hours of co-mediation for general mediators and 10 hours for family and circuit court mediators is a MINIMUM requirement and includes ONLY the time actually spent in the mediations with the parties and NOT time spent with the mentor before and after the sessions.** Those valuable Mentor/mentee sessions are an additional responsibility of the Mentor and, while they serve as training time, they do not count as co-mediation time for the trainee.

The conscientious fulfillment of the function of Mentor is a critical element in ensuring that Virginia's court-certified mediators are competent and adequately prepared to professionally carry out their responsibilities as mediators. The Office of the Executive Secretary sincerely appreciates the invaluable contribution its Mentors render to ensure that court-certified mediators in Virginia provide the highest quality services to the citizens of the Commonwealth.