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Seminar to ⁴⁶⁵examine influence of domestic violence

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In an effort to reverse what it feels is a disturbing trend happening too often, ACTION OHIO will host a legal seminar Thursday to discuss issues related to divorce and domestic violence cases.

The seminar, titled "Navigating Minefields and Increasing Effective Practice in Divorce Cases Involving Domestic Violence and Children," will begin at 9 a.m. at the Ohio State Bar Association.

"There is a trend for children services (agencies) to remove kids from domestic violence households ... and there is an assumption that the victim is not capable of parenting," said Phyllis Carlson-Riehm, executive director of AO, a coalition for battered women that serves as an advocate for victims, survivors and their families.

Carlson-Riehm said she believes those involved in court proceedings need to be more understanding about issues relating to domestic violence and children during court proceedings in order to determine when removal is appropriate.

The workshop targets attorneys, legal advocates, social service personnel and others involved in proceedings in order to help them work more effectively when dealing with abusive partnerships, traumatized children and custody/parenting time determinations.

"People will gain a better understanding of how domestic violence impacts children ... and why domestic violence is relevant to determine child custody," said Mike Smalz, senior statewide attorney for Ohio State Legal Services Association, which is co-sponsoring the event.

Carlson-Riehm said domestic violence is important in proceedings because members of the court can often unintentionally get tricked into the struggle between the abuser and the victim.

"The dynamics of abuse can continue right into the courtroom," she said. "They need to be more knowledgeable so they're not trapped."

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The victim may appear to be the weaker party by not properly representing themselves and acting without confidence in the presence of the abuser, which can significantly affect the outcome of a custody proceeding.

Battered women's syndrome can provide an explanation of the victim's actions, such as why they may have been a bad witness because of stress, Smalz said, or why they change their story or recant statements.

It can also show how removing the abuser from the household will not only improve the victim's life, but improve their ability to be a good parent, he added.

By educating attorneys, they can, in turn, educate judges on how domestic violence can impact these cases.

"One of the key issues is to educate judges about domestic violence issues and why it is relevant," he said. "Some still don't know why it's relevant."

The workshop will not only inform lawyers on how to effectively prepare and present victims, but how to handle the abuser, Smalz said.

Often times, the abuser will mask their controlling nature in court, Carlson-Riehm said, appearing calm and collected, leaving the victim to look like the less competent person.

Such misrepresentation can result in 50/50 custody or sole custody for the abuser, which can "continue the disastrous consequences," Carlson-Riehm said.

Attorneys need to learn how to get beyond the surface of the abuser in order to challenge their credibility.

"We just want people to be more understanding in that dynamic so they don't play a part in it," said Carlson-Riehm.

These issues and more will be examined in the presentations, the first of which will provide an overview of domestic violence, child custody and visitation from the legal perspective.

Mike Bringer, an associate professor in the Law and Paralegal Program at Sinclair Community College in Dayton will discuss jurisdiction, custody factors, visitation and how abusers use the system.

The next section will focus on the characteristics of domestic violence victims and abusers, and how abusers use the court to their advantage with presentations by Michelle Grizzle, community outreach coordina-

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tor for CHOICES of Columbus, and Robert Scheuneman, director of the Mt. Carmel Commitment to Non-Violence.

In the third presentation, psychologist Jolie Brams of Brams and Associates Inc., Columbus-based psychological consultants, will discuss the pervasive impact domestic violence can have on a child's neurological development, as well as other research-based information on its impact on psychological health, behavioral choices, and how understanding such issues can improve an attorney's representation.

Alexandria Ruden, attorney at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and co-author of Ohio Domestic Violence Law, and Peg Davis, a child welfare caseworker for Franklin County Children Services, will discuss Ohio domestic violence law and when it is proper to remove children from violent homes.

In the next section, Jackie Wilson, executive director of Ohio CASA/GAL Association, and Barbara Stamper, coordinator for the Greene County Family Visitation Center, will discuss their roles in providing safe spaces to protect children, and the risks involved.

The final presentation, by the Judge James Mason of the

Franklin County Domestic Relations/Juvenile Court and Charles Jones, administrative domestic magistrate at the Franklin County Domestic Relations Court and Juvenile Branch, will offer the judicial perspective on effective practice in divorce cases involving domestic violence and children.

"It will really give a whole picture of what's going on ... and some of the problems," Carlson-Riehm said.

The seminar is nearly full with 80 attendants registered, she added, but will accept registration at the door as long as there are open seats, as it has capacity for 100.

The registration fee is \$60 per person; \$50 per person for a group of two or more; \$35 per person for nonprofit organizations or government registration; and \$25 for a group of two or more of nonprofit organizations or government registration.

The seminar will begin at 8:30 a.m. with registration and refreshments, and is expected to end at 4:30 p.m.

The seminar has been approved for six continuing legal education credit hours for attorneys, and an application for six continuing education credits for social workers and counselors is pending.

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