



The Maryland Access to Justice Commission is a group of leaders and stakeholders from the Maryland Judiciary and its many justice system partners, including members of the legal services delivery system, the Maryland State Bar Association, the Executive and Legislative Branches, and the Governor's Office. The Commission's task is to "develop, consolidate, coordinate and implement policy initiatives to expand access to and enhance the quality of justice in civil legal matters for persons who encounter barriers in gaining access to Maryland's civil justice system."

Risa Garon, LCSW-C, BCD, CFLE, Executive Director of NFRC and NFRC Peer Counselors Rebecca Beall, Tekyia Brower, Tom James and Connie Greene wrote and gave testimony to the Commission about their personal and professional experiences in the justice system, the need for change and recommendations for the future.

Any parent, or friend of a parent who has litigated their case knows some of the difficulties inherent in the system. Parents are often not well-informed about how their choice of attorney may influence their relationship with their children and the other parent, negatively or positively. The courts may not be able to pinpoint dysfunction in family relationships. Professionals entrusted because of their presumed neutrality may not be thoroughly trained or may have completed a brief assessment, missing the underlying dynamics. Parents may abuse the system by returning to it repeatedly in order to punish each other. Finally, there may be a tendency for parents and professionals to use children as bargaining chips rather than putting children's needs first when negotiating parenting agreements. Listing each of these themes (which can by no means include all of the difficulties in the system) does not due justice to the personal experiences that peer counselors testified to. "I learned that there are so many other people in need of some kind of relief from the court system and that there are many suffering from lack of appropriate services," Tekyia said of the experience.

Risa Garon made some thoughtful recommendations for the future in her testimony, based on research and many, many anecdotal experiences in working with families. She recommended early intervention of a multi-disciplinary team working with families to assess what a particular family needs. She stressed, "Information needs to be gathered early on that will facilitate healthy parenting and co parenting and consider the unique needs of children. I have found that collaborative law is a very constructive multi-disciplinary model that comes closest to addressing the complex and comprehensive needs of each child in the family." Risa recommended education and continuing education for mental health practitioners, children's best interest attorneys and parents about alternative dispute resolution, the affects of litigation on children and families, and how the grief process may impact parent's decision-making. "All of the stakeholders need to be well-versed in child development;" said Risa, "parent plans need to be individualized, needs-based and age-appropriate."

Building a network of support resources for families, as early as possible in the process, can make an incredible difference in how parents navigate the system. At the NFRC, we have our peer counselor program which provides families with a sense of hope while they cope with the challenges of their own family transition.

Risa ended her testimony with this advice: What must be done on a universal scale is something that Emily Banks said, in her book, *Mending Broken Families*. "Let our social policies declare that parents should and must work together for the sake of their children...I have yet to see general education or awareness campaigns that remind parents about the importance of keeping both (nonviolent) parents involved in children's lives and the benefits to children when parents put aside their differences to focus on their children. Social change results from multiple different efforts: public policy, grassroots efforts, social programming, and general public education."