

Assembly Bill No. 1843

CHAPTER 283

An act to amend Section 129 of the Business and Professions Code, and to amend Sections 3025.5 and 3111 of the Family Code, relating to child custody.

[Approved by Governor August 25, 2014. Filed with
Secretary of State August 25, 2014.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 1843, Jones. Child custody evaluations: confidentiality.

(1) Existing law authorizes a court, in any contested child custody or visitation rights proceeding, to appoint a child custody evaluator to conduct a child custody evaluation, as specified, if the court determines it is in the best interests of the child. Existing law requires the child custody evaluator, if directed by the court, to file a written confidential report on his or her evaluation at least 10 days before any hearing regarding the custody of the child with the clerk of the court, as specified. Existing law requires this report to be served on the parties or their attorneys, and any other counsel appointed for the child. Existing law otherwise prohibits the disclosure of the report, except in certain probate guardianship proceedings, as specified.

Existing law requires the information from a report containing psychological evaluations of a child or recommendations regarding custody or visitation submitted to the court in any proceeding involving child custody or visitation rights to be contained in a document that is to be placed in the confidential portion of the court file. Existing law applies this requirement to, among other things, the written confidential report described above, child custody or visitation recommendations made to the court pursuant to mediation proceedings, and a written statement of issues and contentions put forth by a child's appointed counsel. Existing law prohibits these reports and recommendations from being disclosed, except to specified persons, including, among others, a party to the proceeding or his or her attorney, a federal or state law enforcement officer, a court employee acting within the scope of his or her duties, a child's appointed counsel, or any other person upon order of the court for good cause.

This bill would additionally authorize the disclosure of this confidential information to the licensing entity of a child custody evaluator and would prescribe the manner in which the licensing entity is authorized to use the confidential information disclosed to it, as specified.

This bill would make a clarifying change to authorize the disclosure of a child custody evaluator's written confidential report pursuant to the provisions described above. The bill would delete an obsolete provision

relating to the written statement of issues and contentions put forth by a child's appointed counsel.

(2) Existing law requires a board, as defined, within the Department of Consumer Affairs, upon receipt of any complaint respecting a licensee, to notify the complainant of the initial and final action taken on his or her complaint, as specified. Existing law requires the board, when it deems appropriate, to notify the person against whom the complaint is made of the nature of the complaint and authorizes the board to request appropriate relief for the complainant and to meet and confer with the complainant and the licensee in order to mediate the complaint.

This bill would, notwithstanding any other law, require the board, upon receipt of a child custody evaluation report, as specified, to notify the noncomplaining party in the underlying child custody dispute, who is a subject of that report, of the pending investigation.

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

SECTION 1. Section 129 of the Business and Professions Code is amended to read:

129. (a) As used in this section, "board" means every board, bureau, commission, committee, and similarly constituted agency in the department that issues licenses.

(b) Each board shall, upon receipt of any complaint respecting an individual licensed by the board, notify the complainant of the initial administrative action taken on his or her complaint within 10 days of receipt. Each board shall notify the complainant of the final action taken on his or her complaint. There shall be a notification made in every case in which the complainant is known. If the complaint is not within the jurisdiction of the board or if the board is unable to dispose satisfactorily of the complaint, the board shall transmit the complaint together with any evidence or information it has concerning the complaint to the agency, public or private, whose authority in the opinion of the board will provide the most effective means to secure the relief sought. The board shall notify the complainant of this action and of any other means that may be available to the complainant to secure relief.

(c) The board shall, when the board deems it appropriate, notify the person against whom the complaint is made of the nature of the complaint, may request appropriate relief for the complainant, and may meet and confer with the complainant and the licensee in order to mediate the complaint. Nothing in this subdivision shall be construed as authorizing or requiring any board to set or to modify any fee charged by a licensee.

(d) It shall be the continuing duty of the board to ascertain patterns of complaints and to report on all actions taken with respect to those patterns of complaints to the director and to the Legislature at least once per year. The board shall evaluate those complaints dismissed for lack of jurisdiction or no violation and recommend to the director and to the Legislature at least

once per year the statutory changes it deems necessary to implement the board's functions and responsibilities under this section.

(e) It shall be the continuing duty of the board to take whatever action it deems necessary, with the approval of the director, to inform the public of its functions under this section.

(f) Notwithstanding any other law, upon receipt of a child custody evaluation report submitted to a court pursuant to Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 3110) of Part 2 of Division 8 of the Family Code, the board shall notify the noncomplaining party in the underlying custody dispute, who is a subject of that report, of the pending investigation.

SEC. 2. Section 3025.5 of the Family Code is amended to read:

3025.5. (a) In a proceeding involving child custody or visitation rights, if a report containing psychological evaluations of a child or recommendations regarding custody of, or visitation with, a child is submitted to the court, including, but not limited to, a report created pursuant to Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 3110) of this part and a recommendation made to the court pursuant to Section 3183, that information shall be contained in a document that shall be placed in the confidential portion of the court file of the proceeding, and may not be disclosed, except to the following persons:

(1) A party to the proceeding and his or her attorney.

(2) A federal or state law enforcement officer, the licensing entity of a child custody evaluator, a judicial officer, court employee, or family court facilitator of the superior court of the county in which the action was filed, or an employee or agent of that facilitator, acting within the scope of his or her duties.

(3) Counsel appointed for the child pursuant to Section 3150.

(4) Any other person upon order of the court for good cause.

(b) Confidential information contained in a report prepared pursuant to Section 3111 that is disclosed to the licensing entity of a child custody evaluator pursuant to subdivision (a) shall remain confidential and shall only be used for purposes of investigating allegations of unprofessional conduct by the child custody evaluator, or in a criminal, civil, or administrative proceeding involving the child custody evaluator. All confidential information, including, but not limited to, the identity of any minors, shall retain their confidential nature in any criminal, civil, or administrative proceeding resulting from the investigation of unprofessional conduct and shall be sealed at the conclusion of the proceeding and shall not subsequently be released. Names that are confidential shall be listed in attachments separate from the general pleadings. If the confidential information does not result in a criminal, civil, or administrative proceeding, it shall be sealed after the licensing entity decides that no further action will be taken in the matter of suspected licensing violations.

SEC. 3. Section 3111 of the Family Code is amended to read:

3111. (a) In any contested proceeding involving child custody or visitation rights, the court may appoint a child custody evaluator to conduct a child custody evaluation in cases where the court determines it is in the

best interests of the child. The child custody evaluation shall be conducted in accordance with the standards adopted by the Judicial Council pursuant to Section 3117, and all other standards adopted by the Judicial Council regarding child custody evaluations. If directed by the court, the court-appointed child custody evaluator shall file a written confidential report on his or her evaluation. At least 10 days before any hearing regarding custody of the child, the report shall be filed with the clerk of the court in which the custody hearing will be conducted and served on the parties or their attorneys, and any other counsel appointed for the child pursuant to Section 3150. The report may be considered by the court.

(b) The report shall not be made available other than as provided in subdivision (a) or Section 3025.5, or as described in Section 204 of the Welfare and Institutions Code or Section 1514.5 of the Probate Code. Any information obtained from access to a juvenile court case file, as defined in subdivision (e) of Section 827 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, is confidential and shall only be disseminated as provided by paragraph (4) of subdivision (a) of Section 827 of the Welfare and Institutions Code.

(c) The report may be received in evidence on stipulation of all interested parties and is competent evidence as to all matters contained in the report.

(d) If the court determines that an unwarranted disclosure of a written confidential report has been made, the court may impose a monetary sanction against the disclosing party. The sanction shall be in an amount sufficient to deter repetition of the conduct, and may include reasonable attorney's fees, costs incurred, or both, unless the court finds that the disclosing party acted with substantial justification or that other circumstances make the imposition of the sanction unjust. The court shall not impose a sanction pursuant to this subdivision that imposes an unreasonable financial burden on the party against whom the sanction is imposed. This subdivision shall become operative on January 1, 2010.

(e) The Judicial Council shall, by January 1, 2010, do the following:

(1) Adopt a form to be served with every child custody evaluation report that informs the report recipient of the confidentiality of the report and the potential consequences for the unwarranted disclosure of the report.

(2) Adopt a rule of court to require that, when a court-ordered child custody evaluation report is served on the parties, the form specified in paragraph (1) shall be included with the report.

(f) For purposes of this section, a disclosure is unwarranted if it is done either recklessly or maliciously, and is not in the best interests of the child.