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“Promoting **justice** and **self-determination** through the **peaceful resolution** of **disputes** for individuals, families and businesses.”



SUMMER 2008

**Dispute Resolution Center
of West Michigan**

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“**Mediation**
is more **friendly**
than court.”

**Supplementing the Court
System: Mediation is
Better, Faster, Cheaper**

Budget crunches are forcing courts to re-examine how and where they provide services, prompting many discussions about cuts and consolidations. However, there is another alternative: using the services of the Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan. Over 81% of the cases brought to the Center are resolved successfully. And the cost to participants is substantially less than litigation, since services are charged on a sliding scale or free.

During mediation, a trained volunteer leads people through a process of discussion so that they can resolve their differences. Most mediation meetings are scheduled within two weeks, and the actual meeting usually requires ninety minutes or less. The same case could take weeks or months in court.

“Mediation brings peaceful resolution to approximately 81% of the cases that come through our door,” says Jon Wilmot, Executive Director. “The agreements are written up by the mediator, signed by the parties, and are viewed as legally binding. The parties usually abide by the agreement voluntarily, because they reached it together.”

The Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan serves seven county court systems with mediation services: Kent, Isabella, Lake, Montcalm, Mecosta, Newaygo and Osceola. Their services are used in a variety of cases: small claims, landlord-tenant disputes, employment disputes, divorce and parenting cases, agricultural disputes, and much more. The Center offers free or sliding-scale services to anyone with a dispute, regardless of whether they come in through the court system or independently. The Center uses highly-trained volunteers to mediate cases, so they can accommodate fluctuating caseloads quite easily.

Studies have shown that compliance with mediated agreements is over 90%. It's no wonder the success rate is so high: the mediation process receives high praise from participants. People come in disheartened, angry and apprehensive, with no hope of finding resolution. At the end they are relieved, surprised and appreciative. They have solved their problem. They have built a foundation to restore the relationship. But more importantly, they have learned a process that they can use in the future.

“Learning to talk to each other and solve differences is an essential skill for human co-existence,” says Wilmot. “When people practices these skills, our community becomes a stronger, better, more peaceful place to live.”

Become a Volunteer

The Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan is a unique organization. Most of its true work—that of mediating disputes—is done by volunteers. Our volunteers attend a comprehensive training program that teaches them how to facilitate a mediation session. We teach them a proven process that can be used to mediate any type of dispute.

Our training includes a 40-hour SCCAO-approved course, along with observing mediations, co-mediating disputes, observation by a qualified mediator, and post-session debriefing. We equip trainees with all the information to be an effective mediator for all disputes.

Most of our mediators have been with us for a long time. They get an intense feeling of satisfaction from helping people resolve their differences in a constructive, healing way. Bill Postmus, a Board member and longtime volunteer, puts it this way: “I am involved in mediation not because I know the answers, but because I have become good at the process that helps people find their own answers. Mediation is satisfying to me, because I’m helping people who want to help themselves.”

A typical mediation requires one meeting of approximately 90 minutes. Our mediators usually get involved in one or two cases per month.

If you would like to attend mediator training for yourself, or would like information about becoming a mediator for the Dispute Resolution Center, please call us at 616-774-0121.

Tone it Down

Disputes between neighbors are fairly common. Fortunately, mediation can help in many cases. Take for instance the case of two families that had been at each other’s throats for a long time. The police were called out repeatedly to settle disputes between the neighbors. The police department finally made a referral to the Dispute Resolution Center for mediation.

Tension was thick in the air as the parties “faced off” across the table. Soon, however, the hostility came right to the surface in angry words and accusations. While they talked, the mediator attempted to help them identify the actual problems that needed to be resolved, and focus on areas of agreement. As they circled in on the main issues, the mediator reminded them that unless they could reach agreement, the issue would wind up in court. Neither party wanted that. So they negotiated a bit more and struck a deal. They agreed to work together insulating a home to tone down a persistent noise problem.

The people stayed out of court; they were able to resolve their differences; and it all happened in one meeting. That’s the power of mediation.

“Mediation connects people emotionally.”



2007 Service Statistics

Total Cases -----405

Participant Evaluations

Satisfied with Mediator

Yes----- 96%

No -----2%

No response-----2%

Agreement Was Reached

Yes ----- 77%

No----- 22%

No response----- 1%

Would Use Mediation Again

Yes ----- 82%

No-----4%

No response----- 14%

“Mediation allowed for an agreement that was fair to both parties.”



Chat With the Board:

Kathleen Snapper, President

People often ask me why I am involved with the Dispute Resolution Center. Here’s my answer: I’m involved because I love it and it works.

I have been involved with the DRC since 2001, when I first took mediation training. Now I have the privilege and responsibility of occupying the President’s chair. I am excited about this opportunity, because I see great things ahead. Let me share just a few of them with you.

First, I am excited about the steps we are taking to assess ourselves. When an organization has been around over twenty years, it’s easy to get into the rut of providing the same services in the same way, because that’s how we’ve always done it. We are taking a hard look at what we do, how we do it, and how to promote it in the community.

Second, I am excited about our new programs. In conjunction with community leaders and the 17th Circuit Court, we are piloting a new program called “Marital Dissolution Mediation.” We have two goals with this program: to provide equal access to justice for both parties in the divorce, and to keep the proceedings as amicable as possible.

Another area where we are seeing a huge need is in the educational system. How many times have you heard about kids who bring weapons to school or resort to violence because that’s the only way they know how to solve disputes? We want to teach them a better way. When we reach students, we create a lasting positive impact on our community.

None of this would be possible without the support of federal and state government, as well as foundations and donors. On behalf of the board and the staff of the Dispute Resolution Center, I sincerely thank the people who have made it possible for us to grow in the exciting ways I am seeing today.



“81% of cases are resolved successfully.”

Pilot Program: Marital Dissolution Mediation

The Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan is pleased to announce the start of a new pilot program with the 17th Circuit Court. The program, entitled “Marital Dissolution Mediation,” offers mediation services to couples at no charge.

“This program will accomplish multiple goals,” says Executive Director Jon Wilmot. “First, it will provide equal access to justice for both parties in a divorce. Oftentimes one or both spouses are unable to pay for the services of a lawyer and thus are not represented equally or fairly. This program will address that specific issue.”

A second benefit of the program is that it will help keep the divorce process as amicable as possible. “When divorce enters the courtroom, it becomes controversial. One person typically wins and one loses,” continues Wilmot. “But in a mediation process, both parties have the chance to express their opinions and work collaboratively towards a solution that is win-win.”

Thirdly, the program is designed such that the mediated agreement can be translated directly into a court order. This will save time and paperwork, and ensure that the mediation results are accurately reflected in the final court paperwork.

“Mediation in divorce is extremely complex,” notes Wilmot. “These cases take substantially more time than a standard dispute mediation, and require significantly more training.”

One of the complicating factors in many cases is the issue of domestic violence. Domestic mediators receive in-depth training on domestic violence, and are required to carefully screen both parties to uncover domestic violence issues.

“The 17th Circuit Court and the Dispute Resolution Center, along with some key community partners from domestic violence service agencies, have formed a steering committee to plan the details of this new mediation pilot program,” says Wilmot.

“In a mediation process, both parties have the chance to express their opinions and work collaboratively towards a solution that is win-win.”

“We are exploring how to ensure that victims of domestic violence have equal access to justice. Our hope is that a modified mediation process can still be used in some of these difficult situations in a way that is safe, fair and accessible.”

The program will kick off with a training session for mediators in November.