

CHAPTER 679

INFORMAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION

[P]

Desirability of informal dispute resolution procedures; general assembly's findings; see 85 Acts, ch 134, §1

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679.1 Definitions.

As used in this chapter:

1. “*Approved center*” or “*approved dispute resolution center*” means a center that has applied for and received approval from the executive director under section 679.3.

2. “*Center*” or “*dispute resolution center*” means a program which is organized by one or more governmental subdivisions or nonprofit organizations and which makes informal dispute resolution procedures available.

3. “*Council*” means the prosecuting attorneys training coordination council in the department of justice, established by chapter 13A.

4. “*Dispute resolution process*” or “*informal dispute resolution process*” means a process by which the parties involved in a minor dispute voluntarily agree to enter into informal discussion and negotiation with the assistance of a mediator or member of the center’s staff in order to resolve their dispute.

5. “*Executive director*” means the executive director of the prosecuting attorneys training coordination council.

6. “*Mediator*” means a person who assists parties involved in a minor dispute to reach a mutually acceptable resolution of their dispute.

85 Acts, ch 134, §2

679.2 Dispute resolution program — administration.

1. There is established in the office of prosecuting attorneys training coordinator of the department of justice a program for the establishment and support of locally organized dispute resolution centers which make informal dispute resolution procedures available. The executive director of the prosecuting attorneys training coordination council shall administer the program under the direction of the council.

2. The executive director, subject to approval by the council, may appoint an advisory committee to advise the executive director and the council on the administration of the dispute resolution program. If an advisory committee is appointed it shall consist of not more than seven members and shall include at least three representatives of existing dispute resolution centers. The committee shall meet at the call of the executive director. Members shall serve without compensation but are entitled to actual expenses incurred in the performance of their duties. Payment shall be made from funds appropriated to the council for the administration of the dispute resolution program.

85 Acts, ch 134, §3

679.3 Establishment and approval of dispute resolution centers.

A center, or entity proposing a center, may apply to the executive director for approval to participate in the dispute resolution program. The application shall set forth a plan for operation of the center, including such information as the center’s objectives, areas or populations to be served, administrative organization, budget, recordkeeping, criteria for accepting cases, availability of mediators, and procedures for receiving and screening

requests, scheduling and conducting sessions with the mediator, and terminating the dispute resolution process through agreement or otherwise. The executive director shall prescribe the form of application and specify the information to be included and shall set the deadline for filing. A center must submit an application for each year in which it desires to participate in the program.

The executive director shall review the applications and shall approve for participation in the program all applicants which meet the requirements of this chapter and rules adopted pursuant to this chapter.

85 Acts, ch 134, §4

679.4 Funding of dispute resolution centers.

1. The executive director, subject to approval by the council, shall distribute state grants to approved dispute resolution centers from funds appropriated for that purpose. The amount distributed may vary among the centers based on need. The state grant shall not exceed fifty percent of the estimated annual cost of a center.

2. The administrator of each center may accept and disburse the state grants and grants and gifts from federal and other public and private sources for the operation of the center. Centers are encouraged to make use of local resources whenever possible, including the use of volunteers and available space in public facilities.

3. The executive director may accept and disburse grants and gifts from federal and other public and private sources for the dispute resolution program.

85 Acts, ch 134, §5

679.5 Referrals to dispute resolution centers.

1. The following types of cases may be accepted for dispute resolution at an approved dispute resolution center, subject to such limitations as the council prescribes by rule:

a. Civil claims and disputes, including but not limited to neighborhood disputes, landlord-tenant disputes, debtor-creditor disputes and consumer complaints.

b. Disputes concerning child custody and visitation rights.

c. Juvenile offenses.

d. Criminal complaints.

2. A center may accept cases referred by a court, prosecuting attorney, law enforcement officer, social service agency or any other interested person or agency, or at the request of the parties involved in the dispute. A case may be referred prior to the commencement of formal judicial proceedings or at any stage of such proceedings. The center shall provide follow-up information on the disposition of a case if the case was referred by a court and the court requests the information.

85 Acts, ch 134, §6

679.6 Preliminary information.

Before the dispute resolution process begins, the approved dispute resolution center shall provide the parties with a written statement setting forth the procedures to be followed. The statement shall be in the form prescribed in the rules adopted by the council under this chapter.

85 Acts, ch 134, §7

679.7 Fees.

Except as otherwise provided in this section, an approved dispute resolution center shall require each party to pay a fee to help defray the administrative costs of the dispute resolution process. The council shall establish a sliding scale of fees to be charged, based upon ability to pay. A person shall not be denied the services of a dispute resolution center solely because of inability to pay the fee.

85 Acts, ch 134, §8

679.8 Mediators.

An impartial mediator shall be assigned to each case scheduled for a mediation session. A person is not eligible to serve as a mediator in an approved center until the person has completed at least twenty-five hours of training in conflict resolution techniques approved by the executive director. The council may by rule establish classifications of disputes and provide that a person is not eligible to serve as a mediator in a particular class of dispute unless the person possesses additional credentials or completes additional specialized training, or both.

A center may provide for the compensation of mediators or utilize the services of volunteer mediators, or both.

The mediator shall assist the parties to reach a mutually acceptable resolution of their dispute through discussion and negotiation. The mediator shall officially terminate the dispute resolution process if the parties are unable to agree. The termination shall be without prejudice to either party in any other proceeding. The mediator and the center have no authority to make or impose any adjudication, sanction or penalty upon the parties.

85 Acts, ch 134, §9

679.9 Agreement.

If the parties involved in the dispute reach agreement, the agreement may be reduced to writing and signed by the parties. The agreement shall set forth the settlement of the issues and the future responsibilities of each party.

85 Acts, ch 134, §10

679.10 Rules.

The council shall adopt rules to carry out the purposes of this chapter. In addition to matters expressly required elsewhere in this chapter, the rules may include the following:

1. Requirements relating to the administration of a dispute resolution center, including budgeting, recordkeeping, reporting, evaluation and administrative organization.
2. Requirements for advisory committees to assist dispute resolution centers.
3. Procedures to be followed in the dispute resolution process.
4. Forms to assist dispute resolution centers in carrying out their duties.

85 Acts, ch 134, §11

679.11 Report.

The executive director shall report annually to the general assembly and the governor concerning the operation of the dispute resolution program.

85 Acts, ch 134, §12

679.12 Confidentiality.

If mediation is conducted pursuant to this chapter, the confidentiality of all mediation communications is protected as provided in section 679C.108.

85 Acts, ch 134, §13; 98 Acts, ch 1062, §12; 2005 Acts, ch 68, §5

679.13 Limitation on liability.

No mediator, employee or agent of a center, or member of a center's board may be held liable for civil damages for any statement or decision made in the process of dispute resolution unless the mediator, employee, agent or member acted in bad faith, with malicious purpose or in a manner exhibiting willful and wanton disregard of human rights, safety or property.

85 Acts, ch 134, §14

679.14 Tolling of statute of limitations.

During the period of the dispute resolution process, any applicable statute of limitations is tolled as to the participants. The tolling shall commence on the date the center accepts the case and shall end on the date the parties are notified in writing that the case has been closed

by the center. Notices of the closing of cases shall be provided in accordance with appropriate rules adopted under this chapter.

85 Acts, ch 134, §15