

## ***Press Release***

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For Immediate Release

February 23, 2006

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### **National Elder Mediation Network Formed at Mini-Summit**

At the conclusion of a 2-day meeting on Feb. 9-10 in Georgia titled "Assessing Elder Mediation Today and Developing Guidelines for Future Directions: A Mini-Summit," participants formed a new National Elder Mediation Network.

Penny Hommel, convener of the Mini-Summit and Co-Director of The Center for Social Gerontology (TCSG) said "The purpose of the National Elder Mediation Network is to bring together an experienced, concerned, multi-disciplinary group to collaborate in defining, developing and supporting high-quality facilitation, mediation and related elder services. The Network's mission is to provide national leadership -- through policies, ethical standards and best-practice guidelines -- for a continuum of decision-making, planning and conflict resolution services that enhance communication, give voice to older persons, and strengthen relationships among elders, their families and the elder care community, while also promoting autonomy, independence and quality of life for the nation's elders."

After years of work on guardianship law reform, TCSG determined that new means were needed to help older persons and families address disputes and difficult decisions surrounding guardianship, which deprives older persons of fundamental rights to make decisions about their person and/or property. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, TCSG pioneered the use of mediation as a new means of addressing underlying issues and problems and exploring less restrictive alternatives to guardianship. In the mid 1990s, TCSG expanded its guardianship mediation initiatives to also include pre-petition cases, and early in this decade, further expanded to include elder/family caregiver cases involving difficult and stressful decisions, discussions and disputes.

"Over the past almost 20 years, we have developed and assisted in implementing both guardianship and caregiver mediation initiatives in Michigan and across the country. We have trained hundreds of mediators to handle these complex, multi-party cases, with the goal being to assist elders, their families and others in decision-making, planning and conflict resolution.

Many of the elder mediation programs developed around the country grew out of TCSG's pioneering efforts and training," said Hommel.

Hommel continued. "While we at TCSG believe that mediation can be extremely helpful, we have been increasingly confronted with several challenges, and the more we work with others across the country, we learn they are facing similar challenges. One is the challenge of under-utilization of mediation which raises myriad questions about outreach, building referral sources,

and even if mediation by itself is the right service or if there is a need for a continuum of related services. The other is the challenge of quality assurance as guardianship/caregiver/elder mediation expands into the main-stream of mediation practice; what type of guidance/leadership is needed to ensure that mediators are adequately prepared to safeguard elders' autonomy and rights, and that mediation does not unintentionally lead to limiting the rights and voices of older persons?"

The Mini-Summit was convened in response to these concerns and questions. Bringing together a multi-disciplinary group of about 20 professionals in aging, law, and mediation, the Mini-Summit provided an opportunity for brainstorming these and related issues.

Ellie Crosby Lanier, a Consulting Attorney and mediation trainer for TCSG from Georgia, said "the timing was right for an in-depth discussion of some key questions, including 1) why does there seem to be a paucity of cases that go to mediation in spite of the enthusiasm which the idea of mediation engenders initially among potential referral sources? and 2) is mediation possibly missing the mark in meeting the needs of elders that we hoped it would meet?"

The Legal Services Developer for Georgia, Natalie Thomas, added: "As elder mediation expands into the mainstream of mediation practice, we need to look at quality assurance issues, including assuring that mediators understand issues related to aging and, most importantly, that elders' rights and autonomy are protected so that mediation does not unintentionally lead to limiting rights and voices of older persons."

These questions formed the basis for a wide-ranging discussion by participants. Jim Bergman, TCSG Co-Director, said "I was impressed by the quality and comprehensiveness of the discussions and the commitment of the participants to join together to continue working on these important issues."

At the conclusion of the 2-day Mini-Summit, the 20+ participants agreed to continue their work together through the formation of the new National Elder Mediation Network. TCSG will serve as coordinator of the Network, which will add other members in coming months.

The Network members agreed to begin work immediately on four key areas: 1) the essential elements of quality elder facilitation, mediation and related programs/services; 2) ethics and standards for elder mediation services; 3) training and education; and 4) market research and needs assessment related to elder mediation and related services. Working committees were created on each of these topics. Network members will confer regularly through conference calls, meetings, a list serve and web sites.

Ms. Hommel said "the discussions, the enthusiasm and the agreement to work together to address these important issues far surpassed my hopes for the Mini-Summit. I'm truly excited and energized by the work being embarked on by members of the Network and look forward to being a part of it."

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The Center for Social Gerontology, Inc. (TCSG) is a research, training and social policy organization, founded in 1972 as a nonprofit corporation and based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. TCSG is dedicated to promoting the individual autonomy of older persons and advancing their well-being in society.

For information on mediation and older persons, go to <http://www.tcsg.org/med.htm>.