

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALBERTA CHAPTER OF AFCC FROM INCEPTION IN 2012 TO COMING OF AGE IN 2019

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts is an interdisciplinary and international association of professionals dedicated to improving the lives of children and families through the resolution of family conflict. AFCC members share a strong commitment to education, innovation and collaboration in order to benefit communities, empower families and promote a healthy future of children. Attending AFCC trainings and conferences, generally located in various cities in the USA, contributed to a significant base of professionals in Alberta, believing that membership in AFCC was helpful to the point of being a requisite to working with families in transition and especially those who were in conflict.

At an AFCC Annual Conference in Vancouver B.C., in 2011, several Albertans were invited to the dinner celebration, for the Ontario Chapter of AFCC coming into being. Their excitement as the first Canadian AFCC Chapter, was contagious. After a terrifying but exhilarating taxi ride back to the conference hotel, several Alberta delegates agreed that as we had survived the “kamikaze” taxi driver, we could take on the Chapter building task. We decided that if Ontario could form a Chapter, then Alberta could absolutely do so...and the rest is history.

The parent organization and the Ontario Chapter were incredibly generous with their assistance as we progressed from concept to fruition. We applied for our Provisional Chapter Status on August 15 of 2012. We worked through the parent organization’s “Chapter Tool Kit” step by step and we succeeded on gaining the initial requirement of 75 members in our province and progressed to become a Chapter. We had industrious people on the Coordinating Committee, who guided us through the process with their dedication and wisdom.

The Honourable Judge Lynn Cook-Stanhope, the Honourable Madam Justice Andrea Moen, The Honourable Mr. Justice Bryan Mahoney, Jane Hoffman (lawyer), Patricia Hebert (lawyer), Dr. Bonnie Haave (psychologist), Dr. Stephen Carter (psychologist) and Eileen Ailon (psychologist), formed the Coordinating Committee. The process of setting up the Chapter involved a good deal of time and the completion of many tasks. The committee worked to build the membership base, prepare the Chapter by-laws, designate a Chapter liaison with the parent organization, develop a web site, develop a financial plan and budget, develop a treasurer’s report and submit financial statements to the Coordinating Committee, gain incorporation under the Societies Act of the Government of Alberta, apply to register as a charity under the Income Tax Act, set up the key committees of the Board of Directors, set up Board Liability Insurance, set up Chapter bank account, design a Chapter logo, and plan for trainings and conferences relevant to Alberta members. It took over 2 years to work through the process to become a Chartered Chapter.

On March 14, 2014, Alberta AFCC held its Inaugural Board of Director's Meeting at the University of Alberta, Faculty of Law. Dr. Stephen Carter, psychologist, was elected our first President. The members of the first board included: Judge Nancy Flatters, Krista Frohlich (lawyer), Bonnie Have (psychologist), Elise Lavigne, (lawyer), Greg Pickering (psychologist), Nicole Sheldon (psychologist), Barbara Sheptycki (psychologist), Lorri Yasenik (social worker), Jane Hoffman (lawyer) and Eileen Ailon (psychologist). The membership of the board reflected the interdisciplinary, professional backgrounds of members as well as the geographical make up of our province. We alternated Presidents as coming from either Edmonton or Calgary and alternated the location of our annual conferences between these two major centers in Alberta.

Jane Hoffman (lawyer), a founding member of our Alberta Chapter and fellow passenger in that terrifying taxi ride, has been our stalwart treasurer since we began this journey. Doug Chern initially volunteered to try to help us get organized and we finally created a position for him of Executive Director and started paying him (albeit a fraction of his true worth), several years later. He has tirelessly worked to keep us on track and to ensure we get done what should be done and when it should be done. Eternal gratitude to both.

Our Inaugural events were held in Edmonton and Calgary to host our first General Meetings. Our Nominations for the Board of Directors were voted on and approved, our Bylaws were Ratified, Dr. Larry Fong brought greetings from the parent organization, and notice of the upcoming conference and activities was presented. By January of 2015 we had completed the requirements to gain official Chapter status.

CONFERENCES

Due to the similarities in conference topics and attendance demographics, Alberta Family Mediation Society and Alberta AFCC agreed to hold joint conferences in 2014, 2015 and 2016. Our first joint conference presented Bill Eddy on "Managing High-Conflict Personalities in Separation and Divorce". He was our Key Note speaker and gave a full day workshop. Our conference theme was "Researched Informed Practice".

Our second joint conference was held in Edmonton in April of 2015. "Professionals at the Crossroads: Helping Families and Children Access the Legal System", included Dr. Pamela Ludolph and Leslie Ellen Shear present on "Parenting Plans for Very Young Children" and Dr. Nicholas Bala present on "Legal Responses to Alienation and Emotional Abuse of Children in High Conflict Separations", as well as facilitating a Mock Court.

By 2016, we had grown to 140 members in our Alberta Chapter. In 2016, Dr. Lorri Yasenik and Jon Graham presented a 2-day program in Calgary, titled, "Continuum of Safety Screening in Cases of High Conflict and Domestic Violence". Additionally, Alberta AFCC members, Sharon Smith, Jim Bateman and Brandi Smith presented on Structural Family Systems Therapy with Separating and Divorcing Families.

While maintaining a close and supportive relationship with AFMS, Alberta AFCC decided we would host our own trainings and conferences in 2017. Dr. Marsha Pruett and Dr. Kyle Pruett, M.D., presented on "The New Millennial Family, Navigating Best Practice in a Changing World", in Calgary. In our annual conferences we aimed to bring in top notch presenters, who could provide invaluable information and practical training, in areas relevant to the legal, mental health communities and the judiciary. Additionally, we provided opportunities to show case Alberta's own top notch, presenters.

In 2018, our Edmonton board members hosted our Alberta AFCC annual conference, titled; "Children Who Resist Post-Separation Contact with a Parent". Presented by Dr. Barbara Jo Fidler (psychologist) and Nick Bala (Queen's University Faculty of Law). On day 2 of our conference, Dr. Nicole Sherren (Scientific Director and Senior Program Officer, AB Wellness Institute, presented on the "Impact of Early Experiences on Brain Development, Learning and Health". A team of presenters then shared their experiences on Voice of the Child interventions and Dr. John Pearce and Dr. Terry Pezzot-Pearce presented on "Interviewing Children in High Stress Situations". The conference was highly successful.

Our 2019 annual conference promises to also be outstanding. "Putting the Children First in High Conflict Separation and Divorce, Parenting Assessments, Parenting Plans and Parenting Coordination the Good the Bad and the In-Between". Our illustrious presenters will be Dr. Michael A. Saini (Director of the Combined J.D. and M.S.W. program with the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto and the course Director of the Foundations to Custody Evaluations at the University of Toronto) and Philip Epstein (senior partner at Epstein Cole, Toronto and Editor and Chief of the Reports of Family Law and the author of Epstein, "This Week in Family Law"). Additionally, there will be Interactive Panels both days with QB Justices, PCs, Judges, Lawyers and Mental Health Professionals.

WORKSHOPS AND ADDITIONAL RELEVANT ACTIVITIES

Members of Alberta AFCC, now number 184 and have put on workshops throughout the province, and members of the Alberta AFCC board have also presented in Alberta to judges, lawyers and other mental health professionals, as part of our commitment to sharing of knowledge and outreach to address the needs expressed by smaller communities. In September of 2015, Judge Nancy Flatters and Dr. Larry Fong conducted a 2-day workshop on Parenting Coordination and Arbitration in Calgary. Ten professionals from Alberta AFCC presented on a variety of relevant topics at the annual AFCC conference in New Orleans in 2016. In 2017, lawyers Doug Moe and Brad Mustard, presented Parenting Coordination and Mediation/Arbitration: A Process Designed for Legal and Mental Health Professionals Working in Family Law.

Alberta AFCC has promoted research and has participated in research surveys, developed a Newsletter and shared information regarding both Alberta AFCC, as well as information from the parent organization. John-Paul Boyd, Board member, lawyer and researcher, circulated resources such as Polyamorous Relationships and Family Law, Successfully Parenting Apart: A Tool Kit (funded by CBA and Justice Canada, as well as the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family).

Alberta AFCC has attempted to provide its members with a variety of benefits; trainings in relevant areas such as Parenting Coordination, Arbitration, reviewing PN7 and PN8 interventions, lunch and learns, dinner meetings in both Calgary (organized by Elise Lavigne and Max Blitt) and in Edmonton by Sharon Smith. These more informal gatherings have held presentations on a variety of topics such as, in Edmonton, “Working with Personality Disorders in High Conflict Parents”. They are much appreciated in both the legal and Mental Health communities.

Along with funds from the parenting organization, Alberta AFCC has provided scholarships to AFCC and Alberta AFCC conferences, and a free membership once each year. A self-identified, list of Parenting Experts Conducting Interventions or Assessments Under the Alberta Court of Queen’s Bench Rules of Court Family Law Practice Notes 7 and 8, was created for our members and for the benefit of Albertans.

The Risk Management Group; which formed to support the efforts of mental health professionals, involved in working with High Conflict parents, to provide highly professional, forensic services, while managing professional risk, became an interest group of our Alberta AFCC Chapter. They provide a monthly report to the Alberta AFCC Board on their activities and any important issues impacting Mental Health professionals, providing forensic services in Alberta.

The Alberta AFCC Board has held Board retreats each year, immediately after our annual conferences and have engaged in strategic planning. Leslye Hunter, from the administration of the parent organization, attended our strategic planning meeting in 2016. She gave helpful suggestions and is a most delightful and generous representative of AFCC. The membership in the Board varies in terms of length of term and make up, to ensure members of the various disciplines are represented and the rather geographically “spread out” members, have a feeling of belonging and representation.

Alberta AFCC is dedicated not only to promoting the best practice amongst the interdisciplinary professionals, working to make the lives of children and their families, going through transition, better but also to providing opportunities to connect with likeminded professions, to feel supported in this challenging work.

Members of AFCC often comment on the sense of “being a family” they get from attending conferences and workshops. Alberta AFCC has been blessed with a “membership family”, who also reflect this sense of “we are in this together”, attempting to improve the lives of children and families, through resolution of conflict. Our Board of Directors and our membership are dedicated to collaboration and respect among professions and disciplines, learning through inquiry, discussion and debate, research and innovation, and using evidence-based practice to address the needs of families and children in our beautiful “can do” province.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Ailon

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