
Michigan Mediation Case Law Update

By Lee Hornberger

Introduction

This update reviews significant Michigan appellate cases issued since April 2015 concerning mediation. For the sake of brevity, this update uses a short citation style rather than the official style for Court of Appeals unpublished decisions. Prior cases back to 2009 are reviewed at *Michigan Mediation Case Law Update*, *The General Practitioner* (September/October 2015), pp. 2-5.

Mediation

Michigan Supreme Court Decisions

Supreme Court orders mediation

City of Huntington Woods v City of Oak Park, 500 Mich 1224; 886 NW2d 635 (November 2, 2016). The Supreme Court directed the parties to participate in settlement proceedings and appointed Court of Appeals Chief Judge Michael J. Talbot as a mediator who could direct the parties to produce additional information that he believes will

facilitate mediation. Additional information or comments made during these proceedings will be confidential and will not become part of record, except on motion by one of the parties. MCR 7.213(A)(2)(f); MCR 2.412(C). The mediator shall file a status report with the Supreme Court. If mediation results in a full or partial settlement, the parties shall file a stipulation to dismiss. MCR 7.318. Eventually the Supreme Court vacated 311 Mich App 96; 874 NW2d 214, 321414 (2015), and remanded the case to the Circuit Court. ___ Mich ___, 152035 (May 3, 2017). MCR 7.316(A)(9).

MSA concerning parental rights

In re Wangler, 498 Mich 911; 870 NW2d 923, 149537 (2015)[Justice Markman dissenting], reversed 305 Mich App 438; 853 NW2d 402 (2014). The circuit court violated MCR 3.971(C)(1) by failing to satisfy itself that the mother's plea was knowingly and voluntarily made, and the manner in which the circuit court assumed jurisdic-

tion violated the mother's due process rights. *In re Alston*, 328667 (March 17, 2016).

In 305 Mich App 438 (2014) (Hoestra and Sawyer [majority]; Gleicher [dissent]), the parties entered into a mediated settlement agreement (MSA). The respondent failed to comply with the MSA ordered services. Pursuant to the MSA, the circuit court accepted her plea and took jurisdiction over the minor children. The respondent's attorney agreed that the MSA authorized the court to take jurisdiction. The court said it was taking formal jurisdiction and authorized the petitioner to file a supplemental petition asking for termination of parental rights. On appeal, the respondent argued her written plea that was incorporated into the MSA was invalid and could not form the basis for the court to take jurisdiction. The court ordered the parties to engage in mediation immediately after the preliminary hearing wherein it found probable cause to authorize the petition and ordered temporary placement of the children. The parties negotiated a MSA signed by all the participants. The MSA set forth the consequences of the court's acceptance of the admission plea.

Court of Appeal's Judge Gleicher's dissent said before the court may exercise jurisdiction based on a plea it must satisfy itself that the parent knowingly, understandingly, and voluntarily waived the parent's rights. MCR 3.971(C)(1). No dialogue between the court and the parent occurred. The mediation employed as a substitute for an adjudicative trial improperly bypassed the due process MCR protections. The circuit court never obtained jurisdiction.

Michigan Court of Appeals Published Decisions

Other than Supreme Court leave to appeal cases that are cited as Supreme Court cases, there do not appear to have been any Michigan Court of Appeals published decisions concerning mediation during the review period.

Michigan Court of Appeals Unpublished Decisions

Mediation and domestic violence

Kenzie v Kenzie, 335873 (August 8, 2017). Attorney fees granted, in part, because the husband initiated an altercation with the wife following the mediation at which he called the police and accused the wife of domestic violence, and he obstructed the mediation process that would have allowed the case to reach settlement posture.

Spousal support language not in MSA

Amante v Amante, 331542 (June 20, 2017). The plaintiff argued both counsel and the mediator forgot to include a provision barring spousal support in the settlement agreement. The plaintiff argued that under the plain language of

the judgment of divorce, the dispute regarding a provision barring spousal support should have been decided by the arbitrator. Under the terms of the judgment of divorce, "any disputes regarding the judgment language" should be submitted to an arbitrator. The circuit court did not abuse its discretion in following the settlement agreement and entering the judgment of divorce and denying the plaintiff's motion for relief from the judgment.

Binding settlement agreement

Roth v Cronin, 329018 (April 25, 2017), lv app pdg. "[S]he understood (1) the terms of the settlement, (2) she would be bound by the terms of the settlement if she accepted it, and (3) she had the absolute right to go to trial, where she could get a better or worse result. She testified she understood the terms and would be bound by the settlement, and had the right to go to trial. Plaintiff further testified that it was her own choice and decision to settle pursuant to the terms that were placed on the record." *Roth* was a legal malpractice case in which the Court held that the above comments made under oath by the plaintiff in the prior case were judicial estoppel which precluded the plaintiff from subsequently arguing that the settlement was not voluntary. The quoted language can be used in settlement agreements to help make the agreements enforceable.

Circuit court judge not disqualified

Ashen v Assink, 331811 (April 20, 2017), app lv pdg. The plaintiff argued that the circuit court judge should have been disqualified because, as a mediator over the case, he would have had "personal knowledge of disputed evidentiary facts concerning the proceeding." The mediation scheduled for June 11, 2015, was cancelled on June 2, 2015. The judge never actually mediated the case. The plaintiff failed to show what personal knowledge, if any, the judge had of any disputed evidentiary facts concerning the proceeding. MCR 2.003(C)(1)(c).

Can a circuit court appoint a discovery master?

Barry A Seifman, PC v Raymond Guzella, III, 328643 (January 17, 2017), lv dn ___ Mich ___ (2017). The defendant contended the circuit court lacked authority to appoint an independent attorney as a discovery master and to require the parties to pay the master's fees, and the circuit court should have made a determination regarding the reasonableness of the master's fees. The Court of Appeals held once the parties accepted the case evaluation award, the defendant lost the ability to appeal the earlier discovery master order. Can a circuit court appoint a discovery master? The authority of the court to appoint a discovery master is discussed at *ADR Quarterly* (May 2013), p. 5.

CCA trumps custody MSA

Vial v Flowers, 332549 (September 22, 2016). The Court of Appeals rejected the wife's contention that the parties had not entered into a MSA concerning custody. The December 2015 mediation resulted in an MSA. The Court of Appeals held that the circuit court failed to adequately consider the child's best interests before it entered a custody judgment in April 2016. The Court of Appeals said a party is bound by the party's signature on the custody MSA as long as the circuit court agrees that the MSA is in the best interests of the child. The MSA signed by the parties was binding on the parties subject to the circuit court's doing a best interests analysis. When the parties enter into an otherwise binding custody agreement, the circuit court is not relieved of its obligation to examine the best interest factors. By entering a judgment of custody, the court implicitly acknowledges that it has (1) examined the best interest factors, (2) engaged in a profound deliberation as to its discretionary custody ruling, and (3) is satisfied that the custody order is in the child's best interests. An evidentiary hearing was not necessarily required given the custody MSA. The Court of Appeals indicated that the circuit court also erred by not considering whether an established custodial environment existed. Does this mean, if an established custodial environment exists, the parents cannot agree to an enforceable MSA that changes parenting time, "unless there is presented clear and convincing evidence that [the changes are] in the best interest of the child[?]" MCL 722.27(1)(c). If so, does this arguably mean that an MSA that changes parenting time is a prelude to litigation rather than the end or avoidance of litigation?

Attendance and authority at mediation session

Howard v Glen Haven Shores Ass'n, 325812 (July 7, 2016). The circuit court properly refused to enforce a purported MSA where the defendant did not violate an order by not having the entire Board of Directors at the mediation, and it was known that settlement was subject to approval by the full board.

MSA not enforced

Coloma Emergency Ambulance, Inc v Timothy E Onderline, Ears, Inc, 325616 (2016) lv dn ___ Mich ___ 153839 (November 30, 2016). The parties participated in a mediation which resulted in all counsel signing a "Proposed Settlement" document, which referenced the future signing of additional documents. The circuit court held the document was not a binding contract. The Court of Appeals affirmed.

Domestic relations MSA enforced

Kleinjan v Carlton, 328772 (January 19, 2016), en-

forced a domestic relations MSA. The circuit court did not err by entering an order based on the parties' signed, handwritten MSA, despite the defendant's attempt to disavow the MSA. The defendant was bound by the terms of the signed, written MSA. MCR 3.216(H)(7). She cannot dispute the MSA based on a change of heart.

Custody MSA not enforced

Bono v Bono, 325331 (November 19, 2015). The circuit court abused its discretion by entering a MSA judgment of divorce, which included custody, without first considering the best interest factors. The Child Custody Act requires the circuit court to determine what custodial placement is in the best interests of the children, even if the parties utilize alternative dispute resolution to reach an agreement regarding custody.

MSA not binding contract

In a split decision, *Control Room Technologies, LLC v Waypoint Fiber Networks, LLC*, 320553 (April 28, 2015), held that the circuit court erred in concluding that an MSA was a binding contract. The majority said considering that essential terms were omitted from MSA, and the circumstances surrounding its execution, the three-page handwritten MSA was so cursory in its treatment of complex matters that the parties did not intend the document to be a binding contract.

The dissent said the MSA was sufficiently definite to be an enforceable contract. The MSA incorporated a 50 page plus document which provided essential terms for the agreement.

Repeated challenges to MSA sanctionable

Annis v Annis, 319577 (April 16, 2015), affirmed the circuit court's finding that plaintiff's challenges to the MSA, after the circuit court found it enforceable, violated MCR 2.114(D)(2), and affirmed the circuit court's awarding of sanctions for this violation.

MCR Amendments Concerning Mediation

MCR 3.216 amended, effective September 1, 2017

"MCR 3.216 Domestic Relations Mediation

(3) Unless a court first conducts a hearing to determine whether mediation is appropriate, the court shall not submit a contested issue in a domestic relations action, including postjudgment proceedings, if the parties are subject to a personal protection order or other protective order, or are involved in a child abuse and neglect proceeding. The court may order mediation without a hearing if a protected party requests mediation.

