

So You Think You Want to Be a Mediator...

Over the last 25-plus years the field of mediation has grown far beyond its historical association with labor negotiations. Today mediators can be found dealing with conflict in a vast range of situations – from family to business issues, from school to government settings, from youth peer mediators to elders and their families trying to make care decisions.

While this field continues to expand, the opportunities for making it a career choice need to be carefully considered. Many times people contact us at the Pennsylvania Council of Mediators, asking about how to get the requisite training to be certified as a mediator and get listed on a roster or panel so they can start doing mediations. The answer to this question needs to start with an explanation of the current state of the field – at least as far as it exists in Pennsylvania.

Training

Anyone who wants to become a mediator needs good training. Most people start with taking a basic mediation training. This can vary between 20 and 40 hours in duration. The topics generally covered may include information gathering and conflict assessment, relationship and interaction skills, communication skills, problem solving, decision making, agreement formalization, ethics and professional information. In addition to presenting conflict theory and information, a good training should include multiple opportunities to practice skills in role plays and other exercises.

Training is often offered by non-profit, community mediation centers; and you may also find training presented by experienced mediators who are brought into the area by a sponsoring organization.

Basic mediation is just that – basic. If you plan to act as a mediator in some specialized area, such as divorce and custody, elder issues, environmental, etc., you may need to take advanced training. Training in specialized areas is also offered by both community mediation centers, as well as professional groups.

A good mediator combines a balance of skills in the techniques and a manner that conveys neutrality and builds trust with clients. While training gives a good start to learning how to be a mediator, experience is what helps a mediator develop skills and establish comfort with his/her approach to dealing with conflict. People often expect to start getting this experience by observing a mediation or acting as a “junior” or co-mediator with an experienced mediator. As desirable as this is, it is often difficult to find these opportunities. The requirement for complete confidentiality in mediation may be a barrier to others’ observing; however, if the parties agree, observers may be present as long as the observers agree to the same confidentiality requirements as the mediator. There are limited settings where one can serve as a co-mediator. Community mediation centers usually require mediators in training to get experience by observing or participating as a co-mediator in several mediations. The reality is that these centers often have more volunteer mediators than they have cases calling for mediators. Individual practitioners have very limited situations where trainees can observe or participate in a mediation.

Certification

There is currently no national or statewide organization that certifies or licenses mediators in Pennsylvania. Many times a mediator may state that s/he is a “certified mediator.” That usually means that whatever person or organization trained them provided them with some certification of having completed their training.

There are a number of local court systems in Pennsylvania that offer mediation as an option to litigation in a variety of situations: custody and divorce, small claims, civil suits, etc. These individual courts have established their own criteria for listing a mediator as a member of their roster. If you plan to try to mediate in such court settings, it is best to contact that court to determine their requirements.

Working as a Mediator

If the point of getting trained is to make a living as a mediator, you need to understand the state of the field as far as employment opportunities are concerned. For all the explosion of interest in using mediation in a vast array of settings, there are few people who are able to make a living acting solely as a mediator.

People who take mediation training tend to have one of three primary goals in mind: become a volunteer (as in “unpaid”) at a community mediation center, enhance their skills in their current workplace setting (such as someone work in an HR department at a large company), or offer mediation services as an adjunct to their primary professional work (lawyers, real estate professionals, social workers, etc.).

Many people who have built a sustainable business offering mediation have started with long experience and a broad network of contacts in a professional field. When they have the necessary training and understanding of what mediation can offer to people involved in conflict, they already have the contacts and entrée in a field that facilitates their finding clients who can benefit from these mediation services.

So What’s the Best Way to Explore Mediation?

- Join a national or local mediation organization and attend their meetings. Talk with mediators to find out what they do and how they got to where they are in the field.
- Contact a few mediators who practice in the specialty area that interests you and arrange an informational interview.
- Take a basic mediation training and make sure the skills required match your natural abilities/interests.

Want More Information?

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