



Tough Elder Decisions: The Mediation Option **mediate.com**

by Rikk Larsen and Blair Trippe

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There is a new field developing in the mediation world – Elder Mediation. Why this new practice area? Because the way families deal with elder transitions in America is undergoing a slow revolution. It's not just that boomers are facing parental transitions now. It's the underlying powerful force of ever higher continuing care/nursing home/Medicare costs combined with the need for families to take more and more elder care responsibility at a time when multi-generational family living is in sharp decline. This “perfect storm” of clashing factors inevitably puts tremendous pressures on families.

As a consequence, while it may be overly dramatic to call it an epidemic, numerous American families are becoming "quietly bruised" by the decision process. These families stumble through a major elder decision and end up with a less than ideal solution. Family members may have stopped communicating, may feel they have an unnecessary or uncomfortable guardianship situation, or simply continue to be unable to talk about things like money and financial planning because "Daddy never did that." This uncomfortable “bruised” state of quietly suffering families can be very stable and last for years. Some families never fully recover.

We are finding that the practice of elder mediation often provides an efficient and sensitive solution to the complicated elder care decision making process. Mediation isn't simply an alternative to litigation, a “last resort” forum without the lawyers. Elder mediation is just as effective, and often more effective, at the beginning of the decision process – when families are fact finding, struggling with options and discovering feelings about their parents or adult children that well up and make clear thinking difficult. For instance, an important form of elder mediation is simply to convene a family meeting where a trained third party neutral is present to create the space for everyone in the family to be heard on an important developing family transition. This type of meeting, before the family is in crisis, can strengthen family ties and enable all family members to deal with the changing nature of their relationships and the realities of their situation. It allows family dynamics including sibling rivalries to be addressed at a time when everyone is calm and thoughtful decision making can occur. In this context, meetings can involve not just family members but appropriate professional resources like lawyers, geriatric care managers and financial planners. These professionals are encouraged to attend as their expertise, coupled with their insights into the family's needs, are very helpful.

As baby boomers age and government resources diminish, we will face many difficult choices concerning how we handle transitions during our elders' declining years. Families will have to be able to evaluate resources and options and develop ever changing strategies to support their elders. This will require communication and problem solving skills that will need to be increasingly sophisticated. Elder mediation is a rational first step for families to

help them address their changing needs. It gives them a forum to exchange their bruises for shared decision making and emotional health.

Biography

Rikk Larsen is a mediator, trainer and Managing Partner at Howell Larsen Associates. He practices estate settlement and family mediation in the Boston area and is a founding partner of Elder Decisions, a joint venture with Agreement Resources dedicated to advancing Elder mediation.

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Blair Trippe is also a founding partner of Elder Decisions and a mediator, trainer and principal of Agreement Resources. She and Mr. Larsen received their elder care mediation training from the Center for Social Gerontology, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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