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**Order Adopting Amendments to the Rules Implementing
Settlement Procedures in Equitable Distribution
and Other Family Financial Cases**

WHEREAS, section § 7A-38.4 of the North Carolina General Statutes establishes a program in district court to provide for settlement procedures in equitable distribution and other family financial cases, and

WHEREAS, N.C.G.S. § 7A-38.4A(o) provides for this Court to implement section 7A-38.4A by adopting rules,

NOW, THEREFORE, pursuant to N.C.G.S. § 7A-38.4A(o), Rules Implementing Settlement Procedures in Equitable Distribution and Other Family Financial Cases are hereby amended to read as in the following pages. These amended Rules shall be effective on the 4th of March, 2004.

Adopted by the Court in conference the 4th day of March, 2004. The Appellate Division Reporter shall publish the Rules Implementing Settlement Procedures in Equitable Distribution and Other Family Financial Cases in their entirety, as amended through this action, at the earliest practicable date.

I. Beverly Lake, C.J.
For the Court

**RULES OF THE NORTH CAROLINA SUPREME COURT
IMPLEMENTING SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES IN
EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION AND OTHER
FAMILY FINANCIAL CASES**

RULE 1. INITIATING SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES

**A. PURPOSE OF MANDATORY
SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES.**

Pursuant to G.S. 7A-38.4A, these Rules are promulgated to implement a system of settlement events which are designed to focus the parties' attention on settlement rather than on trial preparation and to provide a structured opportunity for settlement negotiations to take place. Nothing herein is intended to limit or prevent the parties from engaging in settlement procedures voluntarily at any time before or after those ordered by the Court pursuant to these Rules.

**B. DUTY OF COUNSEL TO CONSULT WITH CLIENTS AND
OPPOSING COUNSEL CONCERNING SETTLEMENT
PROCEDURES.**

In furtherance of this purpose, counsel, upon being retained to represent any party to a district court case involving family financial issues, including equitable distribution, child support, alimony, post-separation support action, or claims arising out of contracts between the parties under G.S. 50-20(d), 52-10, 52-10.1 or 52 B shall advise his or her client regarding the settlement procedures approved by these Rules and, at or prior to the scheduling conference mandated by G.S. 50-21(d), shall attempt to reach agreement with opposing counsel on the appropriate settlement procedure for the action.

C. ORDERING SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES.

- (1) Equitable Distribution Scheduling Conference.** At the scheduling conference mandated by G.S. 50-21(d) in an equitable distribution action, or at such earlier time as specified by local rule, the Court shall include in its scheduling order a requirement that the parties and their counsel attend a mediated settlement conference or, if the parties agree, other settlement procedure conducted pursuant to these rules, unless excused by the Court pursuant to Rule 1.C.(6) or by the Court or mediator pursuant to Rule 4.A.(2).

(2) **Scope of Settlement Proceedings.** All other financial issues existing between the parties when the equitable distribution settlement proceeding is ordered, or at any time thereafter, may be discussed, negotiated or decided at the proceeding. In those districts where a child custody and visitation mediation program has been established pursuant to G.S. 7A-494, child custody and visitation issues may be the subject of settlement proceedings ordered pursuant to these Rules only in those cases in which the parties and the mediator have agreed to include them and in which the parties have been exempted from, or have fulfilled the program requirements. In those districts where a child custody and visitation mediation program has not been established pursuant to G.S. 7A-494, child custody and visitation issues may be the subject of settlement proceedings ordered pursuant to these Rules with the agreement of all parties and the mediator.

(3) **Authorizing Settlement Procedures Other Than Mediated Settlement Conference.** The parties and their attorneys are in the best position to know which settlement procedure is appropriate for their case. Therefore, the Court shall order the use of a settlement procedure authorized by Rules 10-12 herein or by local rules of the District Court in the county or district where the action is pending if the parties have agreed upon the procedure to be used, the neutral to be employed and the compensation of the neutral. If the parties have not agreed on all three items, then the Court shall order the parties and their counsel to attend a mediated settlement conference conducted pursuant to these Rules.

The motion for an order to use a settlement procedure other than a mediated settlement conference shall be submitted on an AOC form at the scheduling conference and shall state:

- (a) the settlement procedure chosen by the parties;
- (b) the name, address and telephone number of the neutral selected by the parties;
- (c) the rate of compensation of the neutral;
- (d) that all parties consent to the motion.

(4) **Content of Order.** The Court's order shall (1) require the mediated settlement conference or other settlement

proceeding be held in the case; (2) establish a deadline for the completion of the conference or proceeding; and (3) state that the parties shall be required to pay the neutral's fee at the conclusion of the settlement conference or proceeding unless otherwise ordered by the Court. Where the settlement proceeding ordered is a judicial settlement conference, the parties shall not be required to pay for the neutral.

The order shall be contained in the Court's scheduling order, or, if no scheduling order is entered, shall be on an AOC form. Any scheduling order entered at the completion of a scheduling conference held pursuant to local rule may be signed by the parties or their attorneys in lieu of submitting the forms referred to hereinafter relating to the selection of a mediator.

- (5) Court-Ordered Settlement Procedures in Other Family Financial Cases.** Any party to an action involving family financial issues not previously ordered to a mediated settlement conference may move the Court to order the parties to participate in a settlement procedure. Such motion shall be made in writing, state the reasons why the order should be allowed and be served on the non-moving party. Any objection to the motion or any request for hearing shall be filed in writing with the Court within 10 days after the date of the service of the motion. Thereafter, the Judge shall rule upon the motion and notify the parties or their attorneys of the ruling. If the Court orders a settlement proceeding, then the proceeding shall be a mediated settlement conference conducted pursuant to these Rules. Other settlement procedures may be ordered if the circumstances outlined in subsection (3) above have been met.
- (6) Motion to Dispense With Settlement Procedures.** A party may move the Court to dispense with the mediated settlement conference or other settlement procedure. Such motion shall be in writing and shall state the reasons the relief is sought. For good cause shown, the Court may grant the motion. Such good cause may include, but not be limited to, the fact that the parties have participated in a settlement procedure such as non-binding arbitration or early neutral evaluation prior to the court's order to participate in a mediated settlement conference or have elected to resolve their case through

arbitration under the Family Law Arbitration Act (G.S. 50-41 et seq.) or that one of the parties has alleged domestic violence. The Court may also dispense with the mediated settlement conference for good cause upon its own motion or by local rule.

RULE 2. SELECTION OF MEDIATOR

- A. SELECTION OF CERTIFIED FAMILY FINANCIAL MEDIATOR BY AGREEMENT OF THE PARTIES.** The parties may select a certified family financial mediator certified pursuant to these Rules by agreement by filing with the Court a Designation of Mediator by Agreement at the scheduling conference. Such designation shall: state the name, address and telephone number of the mediator selected; state the rate of compensation of the mediator; state that the mediator and opposing counsel have agreed upon the selection and rate of compensation; and state that the mediator is certified pursuant to these Rules.

In the event the parties wish to select a mediator who is not certified pursuant to these Rules, the parties may nominate said person by filing a Nomination of Non-Certified Family Financial Mediator with the Court at the scheduling conference. Such nomination shall state the name, address and telephone number of the mediator; state the training, experience, or other qualifications of the mediator; state the rate of compensation of the mediator; state that the mediator and opposing counsel have agreed upon the selection and rate of compensation, if any. The Court shall approve said nomination if, in the Court's opinion, the nominee is qualified to serve as mediator and the parties and the nominee have agreed upon the rate of compensation.

Designations of mediators and nominations of mediators shall be made on an AOC form. A copy of each such form submitted to the Court and a copy of the Court's order requiring a mediated settlement conference shall be delivered to the mediator by the parties.

- B. APPOINTMENT OF CERTIFIED FAMILY FINANCIAL MEDIATOR BY THE COURT.** If the parties cannot agree upon the selection of a mediator, they shall so notify the Court and request that the Court appoint a mediator. The motion shall be filed at the scheduling conference and shall state that the attorneys for the parties have had a full and frank discus-

sion concerning the selection of a mediator and have been unable to agree. The motion shall be on an AOC form.

Upon receipt of a motion to appoint a mediator, or in the event the parties have not filed a designation or nomination of mediator, the Court shall appoint a certified family financial mediator certified pursuant to these Rules under a procedure established by said Judge and set out in local order or rule.

The Dispute Resolution Commission shall furnish for the consideration of the District Court Judges of any district where mediated settlement conferences are authorized to be held a list of those certified family financial mediators who request appointments in said district. Said list shall contain the mediators' names, addresses and phone numbers and shall be provided in writing or on the Commission's web site.

C. MEDIATOR INFORMATION DIRECTORY. To assist the parties in the selection of a mediator by agreement, the Chief District Court Judge having authority over any county participating in the mediated settlement conference program shall prepare and keep current for such county a central directory of information on all mediators certified pursuant to these Rules who wish to mediate in that county. Such information shall be collected on loose leaf forms provided by the Dispute Resolution Commission and be kept in one or more notebooks made available for inspection by attorneys and parties in the office of the Clerk of Court in such county and the office of the Chief District Court Judge or Trial Court Administrator in such county or, in a single county district, in the office of the Chief District Court Judge or said judge's designee.

D. DISQUALIFICATION OF MEDIATOR. Any party may move a Court of the district where the action is pending for an order disqualifying the mediator. For good cause, such order shall be entered. If the mediator is disqualified, a replacement mediator shall be selected or appointed pursuant to Rule 2. Nothing in this provision shall preclude mediators from disqualifying themselves.

RULE 3. THE MEDIATED SETTLEMENT CONFERENCE

A. WHERE CONFERENCE IS TO BE HELD. The mediated settlement conference shall be held in any location agreeable to the parties and the mediator. If the parties cannot agree to

a location, the mediator shall be responsible for reserving a neutral place and making arrangements for the conference and for giving timely notice of the time and location of the conference to all attorneys and *pro se* parties.

- B. WHEN CONFERENCE IS TO BE HELD.** As a guiding principle, the conference should be held after the parties have had a reasonable time to conduct discovery but well in advance of the trial date. The mediator is authorized to assist the parties in establishing a discovery schedule and completing discovery.

The Court's order issued pursuant to Rule 1.C.(1) shall state a deadline for completion of the conference which shall be not more than 150 days after issuance of the Court's order, unless extended by the Court. The mediator shall set a date and time for the conference pursuant to Rule 6.B.(5).

- C. REQUEST TO EXTEND DEADLINE FOR COMPLETION.** A party, or the mediator, may move the Court to extend the deadline for completion of the conference. Such motion shall state the reasons the extension is sought and shall be served by the moving party upon the other parties and the mediator. If any party does not consent to the motion, said party shall promptly communicate its objection to the Court.

The Court may grant the request by entering a written order setting a new deadline for completion of the conference, which date may be set at any time prior to trial. Said order shall be delivered to all parties and the mediator by the person who sought the extension.

- D. RECESSES.** The mediator may recess the conference at any time and may set times for reconvening. If the time for reconvening is set during the conference, no further notification is required for persons present at the conference.
- E. THE MEDIATED SETTLEMENT CONFERENCE IS NOT TO DELAY OTHER PROCEEDINGS.** The mediated settlement conference shall not be cause for the delay of other proceedings in the case, including the completion of discovery, the filing or hearing of motions, or the trial of the case, except by order of the Court.

RULE 4. DUTIES OF PARTIES, ATTORNEYS AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS IN MEDIATED SETTLEMENT CONFERENCES**A. ATTENDANCE.**

(1) The following persons shall attend a mediated settlement conference:

(a) **Parties.**

(b) **Attorneys.** At least one counsel of record for each party whose counsel has appeared in the action.

(2) Any person required to attend a mediated settlement conference shall physically attend until such time as an agreement has been reached or the mediator, after conferring with the parties and their counsel, if any, declares an impasse. No mediator shall prolong a conference unduly.

Any such person may have the attendance requirement excused or modified, including allowing a person to participate by phone, by agreement of both parties and the mediator or by order of the Court. Ordinarily, attorneys for the parties may be excused from attending only after they have appeared at the first session.

(3) **Scheduling.** Participants required to attend shall promptly notify the mediator after selection or appointment of any significant problems they may have with dates for conference sessions before the completion deadline, and shall keep the mediator informed as to such problems as may arise before an anticipated conference session is scheduled by the mediator. After a conference session has been scheduled by the mediator, and a scheduling conflict with another court proceeding thereafter arises, participants shall promptly attempt to resolve it pursuant to Rule 3.1 of the General Rules of Practice for the Superior and District Courts, or, if applicable, the Guidelines for Resolving Scheduling Conflicts adopted by the State-Federal Judicial Council of North Carolina June 20, 1985.

**B. ~~FINALIZING BY NOTARIZED AGREEMENT, CONSENT ORDER AND/OR DISMISSAL.~~
FINALIZING AGREEMENT.**

(1) The essential terms of the parties' agreement shall be reduced to writing as a summary memorandum at the

conclusion of the conference unless the parties have reduced their agreement to writing, have signed it and in all other respects have complied with the requirements of Chapter 50 of the General Statutes. The parties and their counsel shall use the summary memorandum as a guide to drafting such agreements and orders as may be required to give legal effect to its terms. In the event the parties fail to agree on the wording or terms of a final agreement or court order, the mediator may schedule another session if the mediator determines that it would assist the parties.

~~Within thirty (30) days of reaching agreement at the conference, all final agreements and other dispositive documents shall be executed by the parties and notarized, and judgments or voluntary dismissals shall be filed with the Court by such persons as the parties or the Court shall designate. In the event the parties fail to agree on the wording or terms of a final agreement or court order, the mediator may schedule another session if the mediator determines that it would assist the parties.~~

- (2) If the agreement is upon all issues at the conference, the person(s) responsible for filing closing documents with the court shall also sign the mediator's report to the court. The parties shall give a copy of their signed memorandum of agreement, agreement, consent judgment or voluntary dismissals to the mediator and all parties at the conference and shall file their consent judgment or voluntary dismissal with the court within thirty (30) days or before expiration of the mediation deadline, whichever is longer.
- (3) If an agreement is reached upon all issues prior to the conference or finalized while the conference is in recess, the parties shall reduce its terms to writing, sign it along with their counsel and file the consent judgment or voluntary dismissal(s) with the court within thirty (30) days or before the expiration of the mediation deadline, whichever is longer.
- (4) When a case is settled upon all issues, all attorneys of record must notify the Court within four business days of the settlement and advise who will file the consent judgment or voluntary dismissal(s), and when.

- C. PAYMENT OF MEDIATOR'S FEE.** The parties shall pay the mediator's fee as provided by Rule 7.

DRC Comments to Rule 4.

DRC Comment to Rule 4.B.

N.C.G.S. § 7A-38.4A(j) provides that no settlement shall be enforceable unless it has been reduced to writing and signed by the parties. When a settlement is reached during a mediated settlement conference, the mediator shall be sure its terms are reduced to writing and signed by the parties and their attorneys before ending the conference.

Cases in which agreement on all issues has been reached should be disposed of as expeditiously as possible. This rule is intended to assure that the mediator and the parties move the case toward disposition while honoring the private nature of the mediation process and the mediator's duty of confidentiality. If the parties wish to keep confidential the terms of their settlement, they may timely file with the court closing documents which do not contain confidential terms, i.e., voluntary dismissal(s) or a consent judgment resolving all claims. Mediators will not be required by local rules to submit agreements to the court.

RULE 5. SANCTIONS FOR FAILURE TO ATTEND MEDIATED SETTLEMENT CONFERENCES

If any person required to attend a mediated settlement conference fails to attend without good cause, the Court may impose upon that person any appropriate monetary sanction including, but not limited to, the payment of attorneys fees, mediator fees, expenses and loss of earnings incurred by persons attending the conference.

A party to the action seeking sanctions, or the Court on its own motion, shall do so in a written motion stating the grounds for the motion and the relief sought. Said motion shall be served upon all parties and on any person against whom sanctions are being sought. If the Court imposes sanctions, it shall do so, after notice and a hearing, in a written order, making findings of fact supported by substantial evidence and conclusions of law. (See also Rule 7.F. and the Comment to Rule 7.F.)

RULE 6. AUTHORITY AND DUTIES OF MEDIATORS

A. AUTHORITY OF MEDIATOR.

- (1) **Control of Conference.** The mediator shall at all times be in control of the conference and the procedures to be

followed. However, the mediator's conduct shall be governed by standards of conduct promulgated by the Supreme Court which shall contain a provision prohibiting mediators from prolonging a conference unduly.

- (2) **Private Consultation.** The mediator may communicate privately with any participant during the conference. However, there shall be no *ex parte* communication before or outside the conference between the mediator and any counsel or party on any matter touching the proceeding, except with regard to scheduling matters. Nothing in this rule prevents the mediator from engaging in *ex parte* communications, with the consent of the parties, for the purpose of assisting settlement negotiations.

B. DUTIES OF MEDIATOR.

- (1) The mediator shall define and describe the following at the beginning of the conference:
- (a) The process of mediation;
 - (b) The differences between mediation and other forms of conflict resolution;
 - (c) The costs of the mediated settlement conference;
 - (d) That the mediated settlement conference is not a trial, the mediator is not a judge, and the parties retain their right to trial if they do not reach settlement;
 - (e) The circumstances under which the mediator may meet and communicate privately with any of the parties or with any other person;
 - (f) Whether and under what conditions communications with the mediator will be held in confidence during the conference;
 - (g) The inadmissibility of conduct and statements as provided by G.S. 7A-38.4A(j);
 - (h) The duties and responsibilities of the mediator and the participants; and
 - (i) The fact that any agreement reached will be reached by mutual consent.

- (2) Disclosure.** The mediator has a duty to be impartial and to advise all participants of any circumstance bearing on possible bias, prejudice or partiality.
- (3) Declaring Impasse.** It is the duty of the mediator to determine in a timely manner that an impasse exists and that the conference should end. To that end, the mediator shall inquire of and consider the desires of the parties to cease or continue the conference.
- (4) Reporting Results of Conference.**

- (a)** ~~The mediator shall report to the Court, or its designee, using on an A.O.C. form, within 10 days of the conference whether or not an agreement was reached by the parties. If the case is settled or otherwise disposed of prior to the conference, the mediator shall file the report indicating the disposition of the case, the person who informed the mediator that settlement had been reached, and the person who will present final documents to the court.~~

~~If an agreement was reached at the conference, the report shall state whether the action will be concluded by consent judgment or voluntary dismissal and shall identify the person designated to file such consent judgment or dismissals. If partial agreements are reached at the conference, the report shall state what issues remain for trial. The mediator's report shall inform the Court of the absence without permission of any party or attorney from the mediated settlement conference. The Administrative Office of the Courts, in consultation with the Dispute Resolution Commission, may require the mediator to provide statistical data in the report for evaluation of the mediated settlement conference program.~~

The mediator's report shall inform the court of the absence of any party or attorney known by the mediator to be absent from the mediated settlement conference without permission. If partial agreements are reached at the conference, the report shall state what issues remain for trial. The Dispute Resolution Commission or the Administrative Office of the Courts may require the mediator to

provide statistical data for evaluation of the mediated settlement conference program. Local rules shall not require the mediator to send a copy of the parties' agreement to the court.

- (b)** If an agreement upon all issues was reached, the mediator's report shall state whether the action will be concluded by consent judgment or voluntary dismissal(s), when it shall be filed with the court, and the name, address and telephone number of the person(s) designated by the parties to file such consent judgment or dismissal(s) with the court as required by Rule 4.B.2. If an agreement upon all issues is reached at the conference, the mediator shall have the person(s) designated sign the mediator's report acknowledging acceptance of the duty to timely file the closing documents with the court.

Mediators who fail to report as required pursuant to this rule shall be subject to the contempt power of the court and sanctions.

- (5) Scheduling and Holding the Conference.** The mediator shall schedule the conference and conduct it prior to the conference completion deadline set out in the Court's order. The mediator shall make an effort to schedule the conference at a time that is convenient with all participants. In the absence of agreement, the mediator shall select a date and time for the conference. Deadlines for completion of the conference shall be strictly observed by the mediator unless changed by written order of the Court.
- (6) Informational Brochure.** Before the conference, the mediator shall distribute to the parties or their attorneys a brochure prepared by the Dispute Resolution Commission explaining the mediated settlement conference process and the operations of the Commission.
- (7) Evaluation Forms.** At the mediated settlement conference, the mediator shall distribute a mediator evaluation form approved by the Dispute Resolution Commission. The mediator shall distribute one copy per party with additional copies distributed upon request. The evaluation is intended for purpose of self-improvement and the mediator shall review returned evaluation forms.

**RULE 7. COMPENSATION OF THE MEDIATOR
AND SANCTIONS**

- A. BY AGREEMENT.** When the mediator is selected by agreement of the parties, compensation shall be as agreed upon between the parties and the mediator.
- B. BY COURT ORDER.** When the mediator is appointed by the Court, the parties shall compensate the mediator for mediation services at the rate of \$125 per hour. The parties shall also pay to the mediator a one-time, per case administrative fee of \$125, which accrues upon appointment and shall be paid if the case settles prior to the mediated settlement conference or if the court approves the substitution of a mediator selected by the parties for a court appointed mediator.
- C. PAYMENT OF COMPENSATION BY PARTIES.** Unless otherwise agreed to by the parties or ordered by the Court, the mediator's fee shall be paid in equal shares by the parties. Payment shall be due and payable upon completion of the conference.
- D. INABILITY TO PAY.** No party found by the Court to be unable to pay a full share of a mediator's fee shall be required to pay a full share. Any party required to pay a share of a mediator fee pursuant to Rule 7.B. and C. may move the Court to pay according to the Court's determination of that party's ability to pay.

In ruling on such motions, the Judge may consider the income and assets of the movant and the outcome of the action. The Court shall enter an order granting or denying the party's motion. In so ordering, the Court may require that one or more shares be paid out of the marital estate.

Any mediator conducting a settlement conference pursuant to these rules shall accept as payment in full of a party's share of the mediator's fee that portion paid by or on behalf of the party pursuant to an order of the Court issued pursuant to this rule.

E. POSTPONEMENTS AND FEES.

(1) As used herein, the term "postponement" shall mean reschedule~~ing~~ or not proceed~~ing~~ with a settlement conference once a date for a session of the settlement conference has been scheduled by the mediator. After a settlement conference has been scheduled for a specific

date, a party may not unilaterally postpone the conference ~~without good cause~~.

- (2) A conference session may be postponed by the mediator for good cause beyond the control of the moving participant(s) only after notice by the movant to all parties of the reasons for the postponement, ~~payment to the mediator of a postponement fee as provided below or as agreed when the mediator is selected,~~ and consent of a finding of good cause by the mediator and the opposing attorney.
- (3) ~~In cases in which the court appoints the mediator, if a settlement conference is postponed without good cause within seven (7) business days of the scheduled date, the fee shall be \$125. If the settlement conference is postponed without good cause within three (3) business days of the scheduled date, the fee shall be \$250.~~ Without a finding of good cause, a mediator may also postpone a scheduled conference session with the consent of all parties. A fee of \$125 shall be paid to the mediator if the postponement is allowed, or if the request is within five (5) business days of the scheduled date the fee shall be \$250. ~~The p~~Postponement fees shall be paid by the party requesting the postponement unless otherwise agreed to ~~by~~ between the parties. Postponement fees are in addition to the one time, per case administrative fee provided for in Rule 7.B.
- (4) If all parties select or nominate the mediator and they contract with the mediator as to compensation, the parties and the mediator may specify in their contract alternatives to the postponement fees otherwise required herein.

F. SANCTIONS FOR FAILURE TO PAY MEDIATOR'S FEE.

Willful failure of a party to make timely payment of that party's share of the mediator's fee (whether the one time, per case administrative fee, the hourly fee for mediation services, or any postponement fee) or willful failure of a party contending indigent status or the inability to pay his or her full share of the fee to promptly move the Court for a determination of indigency or the inability to pay a full share, shall constitute contempt of court and may result, following notice, in a hearing and the imposition of any and all lawful sanctions by the court.

DRC COMMENTS TO RULE 7**DRC Comment to Rule 7.B.**

Court-appointed mediators may not be compensated for travel time, mileage, or any other out-of-pocket expenses associated with a court-ordered mediation.

DRC Comment to Rule 7.C.

If a party is found by the Court to have failed to attend a family financial settlement conference without good cause, then the Court may require that party to pay the mediator's fee and related expenses.

DRC Comment to Rule 7.E.

~~Though FFS Rule 7.E. provides that mediators "shall" assess the postponement fee, it is understood there may be rare situations where the circumstances occasioning a request for a postponement are beyond the control of the parties, for example, an illness, serious accident, unexpected and unavoidable trial conflict. When the party or parties take steps to notify the mediator as soon as possible in such circumstances, the mediator, may, in his or her discretion, waive the postponement fee.~~

Non-essential requests for postponements work a hardship on parties and mediators and serve only to inject delay into a process and program designed to expedite litigation. As such, it is expected that mediators will assess a postponement fee in all instances where a request does not appear to be absolutely warranted. Moreover, mediators are encouraged not to agree to postponements in instances where, in their judgment, the mediation could be held as scheduled.

DRC Comment to Rule 7.F.

If the Family Financial Settlement Program is to be successful, it is essential that mediators, both party-selected and court-appointed, be compensated for their services. FFS Rule 7.F. is intended to give the court express authority to enforce payment of fees owed both court-appointed and party-selected mediators. In instances where the mediator is party-selected, the court may enforce fees which exceed the caps set forth in 7.B. (hourly fee and administrative fee) and 7.E. (postponement/cancellation fee) or which provide for payment of services or expenses not provided for in Rule 7 but agreed to among the parties, for example, payment for travel time or mileage.

**RULE 8. MEDIATOR CERTIFICATION
AND DECERTIFICATION**

The Dispute Resolution Commission may receive and approve applications for certification of persons to be appointed as family

financial mediators. For certification, a person must have complied with the requirements in each of the following sections.

A. Training and Experience.

1. Be an Advanced Practitioner member of the Association for Conflict Resolution who is subject to requirements equivalent to those in effect for Practitioner Members of the Academy of Family Mediators immediately prior to its merger with other organizations to become the Association for Conflict Resolution; or
2. Be an attorney and/or judge for at least five years who is either:
 - (a) a member in good standing of the North Carolina State Bar, pursuant to Title 27, N.C. Administrative Code. The N.C. State Bar, Chapter 1, Subchapter A, Section .0201(b) or Section .0201(c)(1), as those rules existed January 1, 2000; or
 - (b) a member similarly in good standing of the Bar of another state; demonstrates familiarity with North Carolina court structure, legal terminology and civil procedure; and provides to the Dispute Resolution Commission three letters of reference as to the applicant's good character, including at least one letter from a person with knowledge of the applicant's practice as an attorney;

and who has completed either:

- (c) a 40 hour family and divorce mediation training approved by the Dispute Resolution Commission pursuant to Rule 9; or
 - (d) a 16 hour supplemental family and divorce mediation training approved by the Dispute Resolution Commission pursuant to Rule 9, after having been certified as a Superior Court mediator by that Commission.
- B.** If not licensed to practice law in one of the United States, have completed a six hour training on North Carolina legal terminology, court structure and civil procedure provided by a trainer certified by the Dispute Resolution Commission; and have observed with the permission of the parties as a neutral observer two mediated settlement conferences ordered by a Superior Court, the North Carolina Office of Administrative

Hearings, Industrial Commission or the US District Courts for North Carolina, and conducted by a certified Superior Court mediator.

- C. Be a member in good standing of the State Bar of one of the United States as required by Rule 8.A. or have provided to the Dispute Resolution Commission three letters of reference as to the applicant's good character and experience.
- D. Have observed with the permission of the parties two mediated settlement conferences as a neutral observer which involve custody or family financial issues and which are conducted by a mediator who is certified pursuant to these rules, who is an Advanced Practitioner Member of the Association for Conflict Resolution and subject to requirements equivalent to those in effect for Practitioner Members of the Academy of Family Mediators immediately prior to its merger with other organizations to become the Association for Conflict Resolution, or who is an A.O.C. mediator.
- E. Demonstrate familiarity with the statutes, rules, and standards of practice and conduct governing mediated settlement conferences conducted pursuant to these Rules.
- F. Be of good moral character and adhere to any standards of practice for mediators acting pursuant to these Rules adopted by the Supreme Court. Applicants for certification and recertification and all certified family financial mediators shall report to the Commission any criminal convictions, disbarments or other disciplinary complaints and actions as soon as the applicant or mediator has notice of them. Any current or former attorney who is disqualified by the attorney licensing authority of any state shall be ineligible to be certified under this Rule.
- G. Submit proof of qualifications set out in this section on a form provided by the Dispute Resolution Commission.
- H. Pay all administrative fees established by the Administrative Office of the Court in consultation with the Dispute Resolution Commission.
- I. Agree to accept as payment in full of a party's share of the mediator's fee as ordered by the Court pursuant to Rule 7.
- J. Comply with the requirements of the Dispute Resolution Commission for continuing mediator education or training. (These requirements may include advanced divorce mediation

training, attendance at conferences or seminars relating to mediation skills or process, and consultation with other family and divorce mediators about cases actually mediated. Mediators seeking recertification beyond one year from the date of initial certification may also be required to demonstrate that they have completed 8 hours of family law training, including tax issues relevant to divorce and property distribution, and 8 hours of training in family dynamics, child development and interpersonal relations at any time prior to that recertification.) Mediators shall report on a Commission approved form.

Certification may be revoked or not renewed at any time if it is shown to the satisfaction of the Dispute Resolution Commission that a mediator no longer meets the above qualifications or has not faithfully observed these rules or those of any district in which he or she has served as a mediator. Any person who is or has been disqualified by a professional licensing authority of any state for misconduct shall be ineligible to be certified under this Rule.

Certification of mediators who have been certified as family financial mediators by the Dispute Resolution Commission prior to the adoption of these Rules may not be revoked or not renewed solely because they do not meet the experience and training requirements in Rule 8.

RULE 9. CERTIFICATION OF MEDIATION TRAINING PROGRAMS

- A. Certified training programs for mediators certified pursuant to Rule 8.A.2.(c) shall consist of a minimum of forty hours of instruction. The curriculum of such programs shall include the subjects in each of the following sections:
- (1) Conflict resolution and mediation theory.
 - (2) Mediation process and techniques, including the process and techniques typical of family and divorce mediation.
 - (3) Communication and information gathering skills.
 - (4) Standards of conduct for mediators including, but not limited to the Standards of Professional Conduct adopted by the Supreme Court.
 - (5) Statutes, rules, and practice governing mediated settlement conferences conducted pursuant to these Rules.

- (6) Demonstrations of mediated settlement conferences with and without attorneys involved.
 - (7) Simulations of mediated settlement conferences, involving student participation as mediator, attorneys and disputants, which simulations shall be supervised, observed and evaluated by program faculty.
 - (8) An overview of North Carolina law as it applies to custody and visitation of children, equitable distribution, alimony, child support, and post separation support.
 - (9) An overview of family dynamics, the effect of divorce on children and adults, and child development.
 - (10) Protocols for the screening of cases for issues of domestic violence and substance abuse.
 - (11) Satisfactory completion of an exam by all students testing their familiarity with the statutes, rules and practice governing family financial settlement procedures in North Carolina.
- B.** Certified training programs for mediators certified pursuant to Rule 8.A.2.(d) shall consist of a minimum of sixteen hours of instruction. The curriculum of such programs shall include the subjects listed in Rule 9.A. There shall be at least two simulations as specified in subsection (7).
- C.** A training program must be certified by the Dispute Resolution Commission before attendance at such program may be used for compliance with Rule 8.A. Certification need not be given in advance of attendance.
- Training programs attended prior to the promulgation of these rules or attended in other states or approved by the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR) with requirements equivalent to those in effect for the Academy of Family Mediators immediately prior to its merger with other organizations to become the Association for Conflict Resolution may be approved by the Dispute Resolution Commission if they are in substantial compliance with the standards set forth in this rule. The Dispute Resolution Commission may require attendees of an ACR approved program to demonstrate compliance with the requirements of Rule 9.A.(5) and 9.A.(8). either in the ACR approved training or in some other acceptable course.
- D.** To complete certification, a training program shall pay all administrative fees established by the Administrative Office

of the Courts in consultation with the Dispute Resolution Commission.

RULE 10. OTHER SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES

A. ORDER AUTHORIZING OTHER SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES.

Upon receipt of a motion by the parties seeking authorization to utilize a settlement procedure in lieu of a mediated settlement conference, the Court may order the use of those procedures listed in Rule 10.B. unless the Court finds: that the parties did not agree upon the procedure to be utilized, the neutral to conduct it, or the neutral's compensation; or that the procedure selected is not appropriate for the case or the parties. Judicial settlement conferences may be ordered only if permitted by local rule.

B. OTHER SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES AUTHORIZED BY THESE RULES.

In addition to mediated settlement conferences, the following settlement procedures are authorized by these Rules:

- (1) **Neutral Evaluation** (Rule 11), in which a neutral offers an advisory evaluation of the case following summary presentations by each party.
- (2) **Judicial Settlement Conference** (Rule 12), in which a District Court Judge assists the parties in reaching their own settlement, if allowed by local rules.
- (3) **Other Settlement Procedures** described and authorized by local rule pursuant to Rule 13.

The parties may agree to use arbitration under the Family Law Arbitration Act (G.S. 50-41 et seq.) which shall constitute good cause for the court to dispense with settlement procedures authorized by these rules (Rule 1.C.6).

C. GENERAL RULES APPLICABLE TO OTHER SETTLEMENT PROCEDURES.

- (1) **When Proceeding is Conducted.** The neutral shall schedule the conference and conduct it no later than 150 days from the issuance of the Court's order or no later than the deadline for completion set out in the Court's order, unless extended by the Court. The neutral shall make an effort to schedule the conference at a time that

is convenient with all participants. In the absence of agreement, the neutral shall select a date and time for the conference. Deadlines for completion of the conference shall be strictly observed by the neutral unless changed by written order of the Court.

- (2) **Extensions of Time.** A party or a neutral may request the Court to extend the deadlines for completion of the settlement procedure. A request for an extension shall state the reasons the extension is sought and shall be served by the moving party upon the other parties and the neutral. The Court may grant the extension and enter an order setting a new deadline for completion of the settlement procedure. Said order shall be delivered to all parties and the neutral by the person who sought the extension.
- (3) **Where Procedure is Conducted.** Settlement proceedings shall be held in any location agreeable to the parties. If the parties cannot agree to a location, the neutral shall be responsible for reserving a neutral place and making arrangements for the conference and for giving timely notice of the time and location of the conference to all attorneys and *pro se* parties.
- (4) **No Delay of Other Proceedings.** Settlement proceedings shall not be cause for delay of other proceedings in the case, including but not limited to the conduct or completion of discovery, the filing or hearing of motions, or the trial of the case, except by order of the Court.
- (5) **Inadmissibility of Settlement Proceedings.** Evidence of statements made and conduct occurring in a settlement proceeding conducted under this section shall not be subject to discovery and shall be inadmissible in any proceeding in the action or other actions on the same claim, except in proceedings for sanctions or proceedings to enforce a settlement of the action. No settlement agreement reached at a settlement proceeding conducted pursuant to these Rules shall be enforceable unless it has been reduced to writing and signed by the parties and in all other respects complies with the requirements of Chapter 50 of the General Statutes. However, no evidence otherwise discoverable shall be inadmissible merely because it is presented or discussed in a settlement proceeding.

No mediator, or other neutral conducting a settlement proceeding under this section, shall be compelled to testify or produce evidence concerning statements made and conduct occurring in a mediated settlement conference or other settlement procedure in any civil proceeding for any purpose, including proceedings to enforce a settlement of the action, except to attest to the signing of any of these agreements, and except proceedings for sanctions under this section, disciplinary hearings before the State Bar or any agency established to enforce standards of conduct for mediators, and proceedings to enforce laws concerning juvenile or elder abuse.

(6) No Record Made. There shall be no stenographic or other record made of any proceedings under these Rules.

(7) Ex Parte Communication Prohibited. Unless all parties agree otherwise, there shall be no *ex parte* communication prior to the conclusion of the proceeding between the neutral and any counsel or party on any matter related to the proceeding except with regard to administrative matters.

(8) Duties of the Parties.

(a) Attendance. All parties and attorneys shall attend other settlement procedures authorized by Rule 10 and ordered by the Court.

(b) Finalizing Agreement. If agreement is reached during the proceeding, the essential terms of the agreement shall be reduced to writing as a summary memorandum unless the parties have reduced their agreement to writing, signed it and in all other respects have complied with the requirements of Chapter 50 of the General Statutes. The parties and their counsel shall use the summary memorandum as a guide to drafting such agreements and orders as may be required to give legal effect to the terms. Within 30 days of the proceeding, all final agreements and other dispositive documents shall be executed by the parties and notarized, and judgments or voluntary dismissals shall be filed with the Court by such persons as the parties or the Court shall designate.

- (i) If agreement is reached on all issues at the neutral evaluation, judicial settlement conference, or other settlement procedure, the essential terms of the agreement shall be reduced to writing as a summary memorandum unless the parties have reduced their agreement to writing, signed it and in all other respects have complied with the requirements of Chapter 50 of the General Statutes. The parties and their counsel shall use the summary memorandum as a guide to drafting such agreements and orders as may be required to give legal effect to its terms. Within thirty (30) days of the proceeding, all final agreements and other dispositive documents shall be executed by the parties and notarized, and judgments or voluntary dismissals shall be filed with the Court by such persons as the parties or the Court shall designate.
 - (ii) If an agreement is reached upon all issues prior to the neutral evaluation, judicial settlement conference, or other settlement procedure or finalized while the proceeding is in recess, the parties shall reduce its terms to writing and sign it along with their counsel, shall comply in all respects with the requirements of Chapter 50 of the General Statutes, and shall file a consent judgment or voluntary dismissal(s) disposing of all issues with the Court within thirty (30) days, or before the expiration of the deadline for completion of the proceeding, whichever is longer.
 - (iii) When a case is settled upon all issues, all attorneys of record must notify the Court within four business days of the settlement and advise who will sign the consent judgment or voluntary dismissal(s), and when.
- (c) **Payment of Neutral's Fee.** The parties shall pay the neutral's fee as provided by Rule 10.C.(12), except that no payment shall be required or paid for a judicial settlement conference.
- (9) **Sanctions for Failure to Attend Other Settlement Procedures.** If any person required to attend a settlement proceeding fails to attend without good cause, the

Court may impose upon that person any appropriate monetary sanction including, but not limited to, the payment of fines, attorneys fees, neutral fees, expenses and loss of earnings incurred by persons attending the conference.

A party to the action, or the Court on its own motion, seeking sanctions against a party or attorney, shall do so in a written motion stating the grounds for the motion and the relief sought. Said motion shall be served upon all parties and on any person against whom sanctions are being sought. If the Court imposes sanctions, it shall do so, after notice and a hearing, in a written order, making findings of fact supported by substantial evidence and conclusions of law.

(10) Selection of Neutrals in Other Settlement Procedures.

Selection By Agreement. The parties may select any person whom they believe can assist them with the settlement of their case to serve as a neutral in any settlement procedure authorized by these rules, except for judicial settlement conferences.

Notice of such selection shall be given to the Court and to the neutral through the filing of a motion to authorize the use of other settlement procedures at the scheduling conference or the court appearance when settlement procedures are considered by the Court. The notice shall be on an AOC form as set out in Rule 2 herein. Such notice shall state the name, address and telephone number of the neutral selected; state the rate of compensation of the neutral; and state that the neutral and opposing counsel have agreed upon the selection and compensation.

If the parties are unable to select a neutral by agreement, then the Court shall deny the motion for authorization to use another settlement procedure and the court shall order the parties to attend a mediated settlement conference.

(11) Disqualification of Neutrals. Any party may move a Court of the district in which an action is pending for an order disqualifying the neutral; and, for good cause, such order shall be entered. Cause shall exist, but is not lim-

ited to circumstances where, if the selected neutral has violated any standard of conduct of the State Bar or any standard of conduct for neutrals that may be adopted by the Supreme Court.

(12) Compensation of Neutrals. A neutral's compensation shall be paid in an amount agreed to among the parties and the neutral. Time spent reviewing materials in preparation for the neutral evaluation, conducting the proceeding, and making and reporting the award shall be compensable time. The parties shall not compensate a settlement judge.

(13) Authority and Duties of Neutrals.

(a) Authority of Neutrals.

(i) Control of Proceeding. The neutral shall at all times be in control of the proceeding and the procedures to be followed.

(ii) Scheduling the Proceeding. The neutral shall make a good faith effort to schedule the proceeding at a time that is convenient with the participants, attorneys and neutral. In the absence of agreement, the neutral shall select the date and time for the proceeding. Deadlines for completion of the conference shall be strictly observed by the neutral unless changed by written order of the Court.

(b) Duties of Neutrals.

(i) The neutral shall define and describe the following at the beginning of the proceeding:

(a) The process of the proceeding;

(b) The differences between the proceeding and other forms of conflict resolution;

(c) The costs of the proceeding;

(d) The inadmissibility of conduct and statements as provided by G.S. 7A-38.1(1) and Rule 10.C.(6) herein; and

(e) The duties and responsibilities of the neutral and the participants.

- (ii) **Disclosure.** The neutral has a duty to be impartial and to advise all participants of any circumstance bearing on possible bias, prejudice or partiality.
- (iii) **Reporting Results of the Proceeding.** The neutral evaluator, settlement judge, or other neutral shall report the result of the proceeding to the Court in writing within ten (10) days in accordance with the provisions of Rules 11, and 12 ~~and 13~~ herein on an AOC form. The Administrative Office of the Courts, in consultation with the Dispute Resolution Commission, may require the neutral to provide statistical data for evaluation of other settlement procedures.
- (iv) **Scheduling and Holding the Proceeding.** It is the duty of the neutral to schedule the proceeding and conduct it prior to the completion deadline set out in the Court's order. Deadlines for completion of the proceeding shall be strictly observed by the neutral unless said time limit is changed by a written order of the Court.

RULE 11. RULES FOR NEUTRAL EVALUATION

- A. NATURE OF NEUTRAL EVALUATION.** Neutral evaluation is an informal, abbreviated presentation of facts and issues by the parties to an evaluator at an early stage of the case. The neutral evaluator is responsible for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the case, providing a candid assessment of the merits of the case, settlement value, and a dollar value or range of potential awards if the case proceeds to trial. The evaluator is also responsible for identifying areas of agreement and disagreement and suggesting necessary and appropriate discovery.
- B. WHEN CONFERENCE IS TO BE HELD.** As a guiding principle, the neutral evaluation conference should be held at an early stage of the case, after the time for the filing of answers has expired but in advance of the expiration of the discovery period.
- C. PRE-CONFERENCE SUBMISSIONS.** No later than twenty (20) days prior to the date established for the neutral evalua-

tion conference to begin, each party shall furnish the evaluator with written information about the case, and shall at the same time certify to the evaluator that they served a copy of such summary on all other parties to the case. The information provided to the evaluator and the other parties hereunder shall be a summary of the significant facts and issues in the party's case, and shall have attached to it copies of any documents supporting the parties' summary. Information provided to the evaluator and to the other parties pursuant to this paragraph shall not be filed with the Court.

- D. REPLIES TO PRE-CONFERENCE SUBMISSIONS.** No later than ten (10) days prior to the date established for the neutral evaluation conference to begin, any party may, but is not required to, send additional written information to the evaluator responding to the submission of an opposing party. The response furnished to the evaluator shall be served on all other parties and the party sending such response shall certify such service to the evaluator, but such response shall not be filed with the Court.
- E. CONFERENCE PROCEDURE.** Prior to a neutral evaluation conference, the evaluator, if he or she deems it necessary, may request additional written information from any party. At the conference, the evaluator may address questions to the parties and give them an opportunity to complete their summaries with a brief oral statement.
- F. MODIFICATION OF PROCEDURE.** Subject to approval of the evaluator, the parties may agree to modify the procedures required by these rules for neutral evaluation.
- G. EVALUATOR'S DUTIES.**
- (1) Evaluator's Opening Statement.** At the beginning of the conference the evaluator shall define and describe the following points to the parties in addition to those matters set out in Rule 10.C.(2)(b):
- (a)** The fact that the neutral evaluation conference is not a trial, the evaluator is not a judge, the evaluator's opinions are not binding on any party, and the parties retain their right to trial if they do not reach a settlement.
 - (b)** The fact that any settlement reached will be only by mutual consent of the parties.

- (2) **Oral Report to Parties by Evaluator.** In addition to the written report to the Court required under these rules, at the conclusion of the neutral evaluation conference the evaluator shall issue an oral report to the parties advising them of his or her opinions of the case. Such opinion shall include a candid assessment of the merits of the case, estimated settlement value, and the strengths and weaknesses of each party's claims if the case proceeds to trial. The oral report shall also contain a suggested settlement or disposition of the case and the reasons therefor. The evaluator shall not reduce his or her oral report to writing and shall not inform the Court thereof.
- (3) **Report of Evaluator to Court.** Within ten (10) days after the completion of the neutral evaluation conference, the evaluator shall file a written report with the Court using an AOC form, stating when and where the conference was held, the names of those persons who attended the conference, and the names of any party or attorney known to the evaluator to have been absent from the neutral evaluation without permission. The report shall also inform the court whether or not any agreement was reached by the parties. If partial agreement(s) are reached at the evaluation conference, the report shall state what issues remain for trial. In the event of a full or partial agreement, the report shall state ~~and~~ the name of the person(s) designated to file the consent judgments or voluntary dismissals ~~concluding the action with the court.~~ Local rules shall not require the evaluator to send a copy of any agreement reached by the parties to the court.

H. EVALUATOR'S AUTHORITY TO ASSIST NEGOTIATIONS. If all parties at the neutral evaluation conference request and agree, the evaluator may assist the parties in settlement discussions. If the parties do not reach a settlement during such discussions, however, the evaluator shall complete the neutral evaluation conference and make his or her written report to the Court as if such settlement discussions had not occurred. If the parties reach agreement at the conference, they shall reduce their agreement to writing as required by Rule 10.C.(8)(b).

RULE 12. JUDICIAL SETTLEMENT CONFERENCE

- A. Settlement Judge.** A judicial settlement conference shall be conducted by a District Court Judge who shall be selected by the Chief District Court Judge. Unless specifically approved by the Chief District Court Judge, the District Court Judge who presides over the judicial settlement conference shall not be assigned to try the action if it proceeds to trial.
- B. Conducting the Conference.** The form and manner of conducting the conference shall be in the discretion of the settlement judge. The settlement judge may not impose a settlement on the parties but will assist the parties in reaching a resolution of all claims.
- C. Confidential Nature of the Conference.** Judicial settlement conferences shall be conducted in private. No stenographic or other record may be made of the conference. Persons other than the parties and their counsel may attend only with the consent of all parties. The settlement judge will not communicate with anyone the communications made during the conference, except that the judge may report that a settlement was reached and, with the parties' consent, the terms of that settlement.
- D. Report of Judge.** Within ten (10) days after the completion of the judicial settlement conference, the settlement judge shall file a written report with the Court using an AOC form, stating when and where the conference was held, the names of those persons who attended the conference, and the names of any party or attorney known to the settlement judge to have been absent from the settlement conference without permission. The report shall also inform the court whether or not any agreement was reached by the parties. If partial agreement(s) are reached at the settlement conference, the report shall state what issues remain for trial. In the event of a full or partial agreement, the report shall state and the name of the person(s) designated to file the consent judgments or voluntary dismissals concluding the action with the court. Local rules shall not require the settlement judge to send a copy of any agreement reached by the parties to the court.

RULE 13. LOCAL RULE MAKING

The Chief District Court Judge of any district conducting settlement procedures under these Rules is authorized to publish local rules, not inconsistent with these Rules and G.S. 7A-38.4, implementing settlement procedures in that district.

RULE 14. DEFINITIONS

- A. The word, Court, shall mean a judge of the District Court in the district in which an action is pending who has administrative responsibility for the action as an assigned or presiding judge, or said judge's designee, such as a clerk, trial court administrator, case management assistant, judicial assistant, and trial court coordinator.
- B. The phrase, AOC forms, shall refer to forms prepared by, printed, and distributed by the Administrative Office of the Courts to implement these Rules or forms approved by local rule which contain at least the same information as those prepared by AOC. Proposals for the creation or modification of such forms may be initiated by the Dispute Resolution Commission.
- C. The term, Family Financial Case, shall refer to any civil action in district court in which a claim for equitable distribution, child support, alimony, or post separation support is made, or in which there are claims arising out of contracts between the parties under GS 50-20(d), 52-10, 52-10.1 or 52B.

RULE 15. TIME LIMITS

Any time limit provided for by these rules may be waived or extended for good cause shown. Time shall be counted pursuant to the Rules of Civil Procedure.