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Family Court Judges have expressed there is no greater joy than when a child they adjudicated custody for visits them years later and says "Judge, you made the right choice". Yet, there is no greater sorrow than in making the same decision and having the child hurt or murdered the next day by a parent you thought was safe.

When we ask people to put on the black robe of Family Court, we ask them to be extraordinary superheroes. We are asking them to see through lies, know the enemy, and protect the weak from evil, all while enforcing the law. We expect them to use their wisdom to do their best.

Critical decisions are made every day in Family Court. I am routinely in there surrounded by life's most important issues: Is a parent able to care for their child despite alcohol or drug abuse? Should a youth, who appears to be a danger to himself, be required to remain in a group home or foster care setting? Should an abusive husband be allowed unsupervised visitation with a child following unsubstantiated allegations of child abuse?

Evidence-based risk assessments repeatedly document factors for future morbidity and mortality include substance abuse, job loss, prior violence and suicidal thoughts. We see these pressing issues in Family Court, yet consumers don't have the same rights and opportunities they do with an equally weighty medical decision, where they get to select their doctors. In fact, they have no control over who will hear their cases.

But it shouldn't matter. Each judge should be the best with the level of experience, skill and empathy of an expert – not someone who could afford to run for office, take a job with no pay increase to keep up with inflation, or is so junior that a judicial salary means an increase.

Rather, the qualifications should include a deep knowledge of Family and Domestic Relations Law coupled with life experience to be able to trust your internal wisdom and rest comfortably with a decision knowing you made the best one you could. And that – is key. An experienced attorney who becomes a Family Court Judge knows when to ask more questions, dig a little deeper, and not close the book on a

case before a sound decision can be made. They don't teach that in law school. That comes from years of practice.

Unfortunately, just as one is getting to a point in his or her professional career, family obligations are also increasing. Paying college tuitions, caring for elderly parents, and beginning to consider retirement are real and pressing concerns for judges reaching their professional peak in the Sandwich Generation. They do not have the luxury of accepting a public service job for a below market wage.

Judges are just that – public servants. They sit on boards of directors, participate on Advisory Councils, and preside over weddings of friends and family members. While they do not punch a clock, they work around the clock, nights and weekends. I know a judge that only allowed himself a half-day off for his own mother's funeral because a complicated trial was underway.

Wearing the robe is not about 9-to-5, nor business as usual. Each family's needs are complex with high stakes. We are trying to prevent scars - from the inside out. Mistakes can lead to elevated costs for foster

care, criminal justice involvement and medical insurance, which can extend for some at least three years after the last abuse incident. In cases of permanent disability, the costs may last a lifetime.

We can pay now – or we can pay later. If we do not have qualified judges on the bench, mistakes will be made and we will be unable to move the legal field to where it can be – more effective.

With the introduction of therapeutic justice, court consumers should leave the court better than they came. For victims, Family Court is where the therapy happens which takes time to conduct a proper inquiry – weigh the facts – and come to appropriate decisions. Staffing the court with young attorneys is not the answer. Yet, that is who lines up to run for office. When I ask the most amazing Family Court attorneys “When are you going to run?” – their answers are simple: “I can’t afford it.” As the primary breadwinners for their families of four – a Family Court Judge salary won’t pay the bills.

Given the stress and vicarious trauma judges are exposed to every day, the last thing we need is for them to be facing their own financial

difficulties stretching a paycheck that hasn't kept up with inflation for over a decade. I am not suggesting judges are living in poverty – rather – I am suggesting they should be paid for the job they do, just as society compensates others who make important decisions.

We need to know the right people are applying for the job, believing their experience and expertise will be rewarded. This will only happen if the bench is desirable - a place that attracts the very best. Pay matters. Pay matters a lot, regardless of whether we want to recognize it.

With life and death decisions, we should expect nothing less than the best.

Thank you.