



# THE NORTH CAROLINA DISPUTE RESOLUTION COMMISSION

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## GUIDELINES

### Guidelines Amplifying Rules for Certification of 40-Hour FFS Mediation Training Programs

(Adopted by the Certification and Training Committee on February 5, 2003; amended on March 5, 2021; November 19, 2021; May 1, 2023, and February 28, 2025.)

These Guidelines are intended to amplify Rules 8 and 9 of the Rules for Settlement Procedures in District Court Family Financial Cases (Rules). All trainers seeking the Commission's certification of a 40-hour family and divorce mediation training program, should read Rules 8 and 9 carefully and review these guidelines prior to submitting their training package to the NC Dispute Resolution Commission. Training packages shall include:

- A. a detailed agenda identifying topics to be covered, and time frames allocated to each topic;
- B. a list of trainers who will cover each topic, with each trainer's resume;
- C. the total number of hours and days the program will run (training programs must total at least 40 hours);
- D. a complete copy of all materials to be distributed to participants as handouts, including copies of any texts, of role-play scenarios to be used, and the exam to be administered pursuant to Rule 9(a)(10); and
- E. If the course will be taught through remote technology, a detailed outline of how the class will be offered, i.e. the platform to be used, who will manage the administrative settings on the platform, the settings used, etc.

Any questions should be directed to the Commission's office at (919) 890-1415.

**1. IN-PERSON OR REMOTE TRAINING.** The training course may be offered in-person or through remote instruction. The platform used to provide remote training shall be at the trainer's discretion. All remote training shall be conducted live and participants must appear by video throughout the entire training. The trainer(s) shall control "host" functions or "maintain control" over platform functions at all times. For both methods of training, participants must be able to interact with the trainer during the presentation, i.e. participants can ask questions and receive answers during the live training session.

**2. TIME FRAMES.** All training programs must total at least 40 hours. Because the materials presented will be new to most participants and the pace of training is intensive, a training day should not exceed nine hours, not including lunch. There may be a short (10 to 15 minute) break each morning and each afternoon. Additional breaks or breaks of a longer length may not be included as a part of a 40-hour calculation. The lunch break may not be included as a part of the 40-hour program unless training continues through lunch. While breaks are optional, they must be used each half day or are lost. If a trainer elects to skip breaks, that does not mean that the time which could have been allotted to breaks may be deducted from the requirement for a 40-hour program. That is, if a trainer elects to skip breaks, a program may not conclude 30 minutes short of eight hours each day or 2.5 hours short of forty hours the last day.

The time frame over which a 40-hour training program is offered must not exceed thirty days from start to finish. The Commission believes that momentum builds during training and the closer together that sessions are held, the more likely it is that dialogue will carry forward and that participants will be able to build on the previous day's material. Conversely, the farther apart sessions are held, the less continuity there will be. The only exceptions made to this 30-day deadline for completion, will be for 40-hour programs offered through an accredited college or law school. College or law school programs approved must include at least forty hours of classroom instruction and must demonstrate that continuity will be ensured by virtue of the fact that the course meets on a regular basis, usually once or twice per week, and involves significant reading, research and writing that occurs throughout the semester.

**3. CLASS SIZE AND ACCOMMODATIONS.** At no time should the number of participants exceed 40 for in-person courses and 22 for remote courses. The number of remote participants is limited to the trainer's ability to see all participants on the same computer screen during the training. Trainers must provide sufficient numbers of faculty and other training staff to ensure that participants have a meaningful training experience, including individual attention and an opportunity to actively participate in discussions and role plays. Trainers must ensure that the training site is spacious enough to accommodate participants and offers an environment substantially free of distractions or other impediments to learning. Sufficient space for role-play and other break-out sessions should be readily accessible.

**4. PROGRAM CONTENT.** Rule 9 of the Supreme Court rules lists the topics that a training program must cover during the course of a 40-hour program. The wide array of topics is intended to ensure participants' full exposure to the mediation process. The majority of the 40 hours should be used to cover the curriculum listed in Rule 9.

The Commission intends that trainers have some discretion in determining the content of their training program. However, to ensure that the Rule 9 curriculum is fully covered, trainers are required to devote at least the following minimum amounts of time to each of the curriculum topics set forth in Rule 9 and to discuss at least the concepts set forth below in association with each curriculum requirement:

**A. Conflict resolution, negotiation, and mediation theory.** (One hour minimum) Under this topic, define and note the differences among the various dispute resolution alternatives and explain when it may be effective to mediate and when not. Rule 9(a)(1).

**B. Mediation process and techniques, including the process and techniques of mediating family and divorce matters in district court.** (Ten hours minimum) Under this topic, cover the stages of mediation, negotiation, communications skills; provide participants with a "tool box" of strategies and techniques for moving the mediation forward; cover logistics issues, including scheduling, intake, reporting, collecting fees, and evaluation; and discuss ways to identify and handle potentially volatile situations. Rule 9(a)(2).

**C. Standards of conduct for mediators including, but not limited to Standards of Professional Conduct adopted by the NC Supreme Court.** (Three hours minimum) Under this topic, cover the North Carolina Standards of Professional Conduct for Mediators, discuss the interplay between the NC Standards and other professional standards to which the mediator may be accountable, discuss mediator dilemmas,

and discuss the Commission's Advisory Opinion Policy and Advisory Opinions adopted under that Policy. Rule 9(a)(4).

**D. Statutes, rules, and practice governing mediated settlement conferences for family financial matters in district court.** (Three hours minimum) The trainers will ensure that their program has a North Carolina focus. The particular characteristics and dynamics of mediated settlement conferences set forth in Guideline 6 below shall be discussed and explored with participants. The three-hour minimum shall include time spent covering the statute, rules, and practice governing mediated settlement conferences as well as time spent taking and discussing the exam. Rule 9(a)(5).

**E. Demonstrations of mediated settlement conferences, both with and without attorney involvement.** (One hour minimum) Any live or videotaped demonstrations shall portray a NC mediated settlement conference. Rule 9(a)(6).

**F. Simulations of mediated settlement conferences, involving student participation as mediator, attorneys, and disputants, which shall be supervised, observed and evaluated by program faculty.** (Ten hours minimum, including set-up, role play and debriefing time) A certified program will be expected to include at least five simulations during the 40 hours with each participant playing the various roles of mediator, disputant, and attorney at least once. Opportunities to caucus should be provided in at least some of the sessions. Participants may be an observer in no more than one role play. It is expected that there will be variety among the fact situations and disputes presented in the simulations. Rule 9(a)(7).

**G. An overview of family dynamics, the effect of divorce on children and adults, and child development.** The focus of the Family Financial Settlement Program is on settlement of disputes involving equitable distribution and, with the parties' consent, other financial matters including child support and alimony. In those districts which have established a Custody and Visitation Mediation Program pursuant to G.S. 7A-494, issues of custody and visitation will be addressed at a separate mediation unless the parties agree to include them in their family financial mediation and obtain an exemption from participating in the Custody and Visitation Mediation Program. In those districts which have not established a Custody and Visitation Mediation Program, parties may elect to discuss custody and visitation at their family financial mediation. Rule 9(a)(8).

**H. Protocols for screening cases for issues involving domestic violence and substance abuse.** Under this topic, define the term "domestic violence" or "domestic abuse" to mean a pattern of behavior characterized by using various tactics, criminal or non-criminal, to control and coerce a spouse or partner by fear or intimidation, which may or may not be apparent to outside parties and explain how to recognize the threat of physical or psychological abuse, sexual violence, or any other means used to control a spouse or partner. Cover how to recognize substance abuse and chemical dependency or debilitating mental conditions for all parties involved within the mediation process, and the mediator's professional responsibilities. Rule 9(a)(9).

**I. Satisfactory completion of an exam by all students testing their familiarity with the statutes, rules and practice governing mediated settlement conferences in North Carolina.** Trainers shall supply

the Commission with a copy of their exam and an answer key, administer the exam to the participants and discuss the answers with them. Rule 9(a)(10).

**K. A technology training program with the primary objective of enhancing a mediator's proficiency as a mediator or improving mediators' duties.** (One hour minimum) The program shall include, but is not limited to, education on the following: general instruction on technology and how technology can be designed to perform tasks that are specific or uniquely suited to practice as a mediator. Rule 9(a)(11).

**5. ENSURING THE QUALITY OF THE FACULTY.** An experienced, qualified faculty is essential to the success of any training program. An applicant shall specify those individuals who will serve as the primary faculty. The application material shall include a resume for each primary faculty member describing in detail the member's experience and education in mediation and other relevant experience. Applicants are strongly encouraged to develop a multi-faculty presentation. Specifically, there are three areas of expertise that should be represented: First, at least one member of the faculty must have significant experience conducting family financial mediated settlement conference ordered in North Carolina. Second, at least one member of the faculty must possess demonstrated expertise in dispute resolution theory. Third, at least one faculty member must have significant experience litigating family financial matters in the district courts of North Carolina as well as a detailed understanding of the mediated settlement conference statute and rules as adopted in North Carolina. The family law portion of the training shall be taught by a licensed North Carolina attorney with family law experience. The application should also demonstrate that sufficient faculty or other trained observers will be present to ensure that participants receive individual feedback during and after simulations. Ideally, one faculty member or observer should be available for each group participating in a simulation. At a minimum, at least one faculty member or observer must be present for every two groups participating in a simulated mediation. Resumes need not be supplied for those who provide such observation and feedback if they are not also primary trainers.

**6. ENSURING THE QUALITY OF THE COURSE MATERIALS.** To be certified, a training program must include quality written materials that adequately cover all aspects of the required curriculum, including materials relating to the North Carolina statutes, rules, and Standards of Conduct. The applicant must submit a final draft of the program materials that will be used in conjunction with the training program. The materials submitted should also include (1) the role play scenarios that will be used in the simulated mediations; and (2) the exam required under Rule 9(a)(10).

**7. ENSURING THE COURSE PARTICIPANT HAS COMPLETED ALL REQUIRED PREREQUISITE COURSES.** Trainers must confirm that all course participants have a basic understanding of North Carolina family law and have completed the requirements under FFS Rule 8(a)(1) prior to attending the 40 or 16-hour FFS training course by acquiring a Prerequisite Course Confirmation Form from the participant. Trainers must also confirm that all non-attorney course participants have completed the 6-hour training on NC legal terminology, court structure, and civil procedure prior to attending the 40 or 16-hour FFS training course. Trainers shall request all course participants contact DRC staff to obtain a Prerequisite Course Confirmation Form, confirming the applicable prerequisites have been met. The course participant shall provide the Prerequisite Course Confirmation Form to the Trainer prior to attending the course.

**8. ENSURING A NORTH CAROLINA FOCUS.** Applicants must demonstrate that training will be focused on the particulars of North Carolina’s program, statute, rules, and Standards of Conduct. Trainers who are based in other states or who have conducted training in other states, must be mindful of the specific provisions of the North Carolina rules, statutes and Standards and tailor their North Carolina efforts accordingly. North Carolina has several unique requirements that must be highlighted and discussed with participants.

The FFS Program has been operating in North Carolina for over 26 years and mediated settlement conferences are characterized by certain, now well-known dynamics. Forty-hour training programs are expected to recognize these dynamics and to familiarize participants with them. In particular, the following dynamics and characteristics of mediated settlement conferences should be identified and experienced in training:

- A. The active participation of attorneys (Rule 4(a) mandates attorney attendance at the initial session of the family financial mediated settlement conference.)
- B. The desire for caucusing on the part of parties and their attorneys.
- C. The differences between and the effective use of position and interest-based bargaining and money negotiations.
- D. Court-ordered participation.
- E. The desire on the part of attorneys to draft the agreement. Review who may and may not draft a mediated settlement agreement or a mediation summary.
- F. Performance of a case management function by mediators, as in scheduling the conference and reporting the results to the court.
- G. The desire on the part of attorneys and/or parties to economize on the length and number of sessions. Trainers shall be mindful that parties may not be able to afford multiple or long mediation sessions, as multiple sessions could be very burdensome for employed participants or those with young children and child-care responsibilities.
- H. The need for a contract when a mediator has been selected by the parties.

**9. EVALUATION OF TRAINING PROGRAM.** Each training program must include an opportunity for participants to evaluate the program. The DRC may provide a standard evaluation survey to be completed by each participant with the results forwarded to the DRC. In addition, each certified trainer must provide a participant list to permit the DRC to conduct follow-up interviews with participants regarding the program’s quality. Upon request, each trainer must also agree to supply copies of completed participant evaluations to the Commission and to permit a DRC representative to attend the program for purposes of quality assurances. All remote training shall be recorded for auditing purposes only. The trainer shall provide the DRC a copy of all recorded training within 10 days of the completion of the course. Upon confirmation of receipt of the course by the DRC, the trainer may delete the recorded material. The recording shall not be replayed for training purposes under any circumstances. The DRC may delete the recording after three months or completion of audit, whichever comes first.

**10. RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP COMMISSION UPDATED.** Following certification, all trainers shall advise the Commission immediately of any revisions to the agenda, changes in the identity of principal trainers, and any significant revisions to the contents of course notebooks or other handouts. Trainers shall

not conduct any additional training sessions until the Commission has approved any such changes. The Commission reserves the right to at any time seek additional information from trainers.

**11. ADVERTISING AND REGISTRATION MATERIALS.** All materials advertising certified mediator training programs to the public must identify the Dispute Resolution Commission as the body responsible for mediator certification in North Carolina. In addition, the materials must supply a telephone number for the Commission and direct interested parties to the Commission for further information regarding qualifications for certification. Such materials must also contain a disclaimer noting that successful completion of the program alone is not a guarantee of certification.