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The Role of the Guardian

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THE ROLE OF THE GUARDIAN

I. SCOPE OF OUTLINE

This outline discusses the duties and responsibilities of a guardian under Texas law. The discussion covers all aspects of guardianship administration from the initial qualification of the guardian to the closing of the guardianship. Although this outline discusses the statutory duties and common law fiduciary obligations of a guardian, it is important to note that a guardian may also be required to take certain actions under local court rules. Since these rules can vary greatly from county to county and court to court, a consideration of these rules is beyond the scope of this outline. However, the cautious practitioner will review any applicable local rules before providing the guardian with any advice regarding their duties and responsibilities in administering the guardianship.

II. QUALIFICATION OF THE GUARDIAN

A. Filing Oath and Bond

A guardian must “qualify” before they are authorized to act as guardian. To qualify, the guardian must file their oath of office and any required bond with the probate court, and the bond must be approved by the Court. Texas Estates Code § 1105.002. These steps should be taken within twenty (20) days after the date of the order granting letters of guardianship. Texas Estates Code § 1105.003. The twenty (20) day time period for qualification does not apply when a guardian is appointed for a minor ward under Texas Estates Code § 1103.001 and the guardianship will not take effect until after the ward’s eighteenth birthday. Texas Estates Code § 1103.003. The probate court can revoke the appointment of a guardian who fails to qualify within the time period prescribed by law. Texas Estates Code §§1105.003, 1105.111, 1203.051(a)(1). These provisions apply to a guardian of the person and a guardian of the estate.

B. Criminal Background Checks, Registration and Certification

Since 2015, there have been several legislative and policy changes regarding the creation and tracking of guardianships. The Judicial Branch Certification Commission (JBCC) oversees the registration and certification of guardians, and has a wealth of information at its website: <https://www.txcourts.gov/jbcc/guardianship-certification/>. The JBCC requires each guardian to register online, and each guardian must become certified by completing an online training module. Texas Estates Code §1104.003. Criminal background checks are also now required of each guardian who is not a corporate guardian or an attorney; criminal background checks have been required for several years for private professional guardians, each person who represents the interests of a ward as a guardian on behalf of a private professional guardian, certain employees of private professional guardians, and employees/volunteers of guardianship programs. Texas Estates Code §1104.402. The criminal background check should be completed prior to hearing for the appointment of a guardian. Although Texas Estates Code § 1104.402 prescribes that it is the duty of the court’s clerk to obtain this information, § 1104.403 provides that any person may submit this information to the clerk not later than the 10th day before the date of the hearing. Additional requirements related to the background checks are found in Texas Government Code Chapter 155, including the requirement that a fingerprint based record be provided for a guardian applicant who will be in control of a liquid estate exceeding \$50,000. Guidance on all aspects of the registration and certification process is found at the JBCC website.

C. Requirements and Amount of Bond

Texas Estates Code § 1105.101 provides that the filing of a bond is mandatory in all guardianship proceedings unless:

1. The guardian is a corporate fiduciary, as defined in Texas Estates Code § 1002.007;
2. The guardian is a guardianship program operated by a county; or
3. The bond requirement for a guardian of the person has been waived by the ward's surviving parent in a will that has been admitted to probate by a Texas court, or in a written declaration other than a will.

The probate court is required to fix the bond for a guardian of the estate "in an amount sufficient to protect the guardianship and the guardianship's creditors." Texas Estates Code § 1105.152(a). This amount is defined by statute as the estimated value of the ward's personal property, plus the ward's anticipated revenue for the next twelve (12) months from designated sources other than federal social security payments. Texas Estates Code § 1105.154(a). If the bond is for a guardian of the person and there is no guardian of the estate, the court will consider a number of different factors in determining the amount of the guardian's bond, including the familial relationship between the guardian and the ward, the guardian's ties to the community, the guardian's financial condition, the guardian's past history of compliance with the court, and any reasons the guardian may have previously been denied a corporate surety bond. Texas Estates Code § 1105.102(c). Any interested person may apply to increase the amount of the guardian's bond if the bond is insufficient or defective, or if the bond and its record have been lost or destroyed. Texas Estates Code § 1105.251(b). The probate court can require the guardian to file a new bond for the same reasons, either with or without an initial hearing. Texas Estates Code § 1105.252(a).

D. Safekeeping Agreements

The amount of the guardian's bond can be reduced if cash or other assets of the ward's estate are deposited with a financial institution (as that term is defined in Section 201.101 of the Texas Finance Code) having its main office or a branch office in this state, subject to a safekeeping agreement. Texas Estates Code § 1105.156(a), (c). The terms of such an agreement must be approved by the probate court, and the agreement must provide that the funds or other assets in safekeeping cannot be withdrawn or released without an order of the court. Texas Estates Code § 1105.156(a), (d). The guardian's bond may also be reduced if the probate court allows the guardian to deposit his own cash or securities with a qualified depository subject to a safekeeping agreement. Texas Estates Code § 1105.157.

In 2015, the Texas legislature specifically authorized the use of safekeeping agreements prior to the guardian's qualification in order reduce the initial bond amount. Section 1101.156 was added to the Texas Estates Code, and provides as follows:

Sec. 1101.156. DEPOSIT OF ESTATE ASSETS.

- (a) At the time or after an order appointing a guardian is signed by the court but before letters of guardianship are issued, a court may, on the request of a party, require the deposit for safekeeping of cash,

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