

**TEN COMMON CONUNDRUMS:
LITIGATION ISSUES ARISING
DURING GUARDIANSHIP PROCEEDINGS**

BY:

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THE CONUNDRUMS: WHEN GUARDIANSHIP ADMINISTRATION TURNS INTO LITIGATIONSHIP

I. SCOPE OF ARTICLE

This article discusses issues frequently encountered by practitioners related to litigation in guardianship matters. Failure to consider these issues can lead to costly mistakes. The article attempts to address these commonly encountered issues from both the technical side, i.e., any statutory and common-law requirements, and the practical side, i.e., the authors' observations, suggestions, and experiences.

All references to sections will refer to the Texas Estates Code unless otherwise noted.

II. CONUNDRUM NUMBER 1: PROPER JURISDICTION AND VENUE

A. Definition of a Guardianship Proceedings

Effective January 1, 2014, Section 1002.015 defines a guardianship proceeding as follows:

The term "guardianship proceeding" means a matter or proceeding related to a guardianship or any other matter covered by this title, including:

- (1) appointment of a guardian of a minor or other incapacitated person, including an incapacitated adult for whom another court obtained continuing, exclusive jurisdiction in a suit affecting the parent-child relationship when the person was a child;
- (2) application, petition, or motion regarding guardianship or an alternative to guardianship under this title;
- (3) a mental health action; and
- (4) application, petition, or motion regarding a trust created under Chapter 1301.

TEX. ESTATES CODE § 1002.015.

Likewise, the provisions defining matters relating to guardianship proceedings was also expanded in Section 1021.001. Section 1021.001 now defines matters relating to guardianship proceedings as follows:

- (a) For purposes of this code, in a county in which there is ***no statutory probate court***, a matter related to a guardianship proceeding includes:

- (1) the granting of letters of guardianship;
- (2) the settling of an account of a guardian and all other matters relating to the settlement, partition, or distribution of a ward's estate;
- (3) a claim brought by or against a guardianship estate;
- (4) an action for trial of title to real property that is guardianship estate property, including the enforcement of a lien against the property;
- (5) an action for trial of the right of property that is guardianship estate property;
- (6) after a guardianship of the estate of a ward is required to be settled as provided by Section 1204.001:

(A) an action brought by or on behalf of the former ward against a former guardian of the ward for alleged misconduct arising from the performance of the person's duties as guardian;

(B) an action calling on the surety of a guardian or former guardian to perform in place of the guardian or former guardian, which may include the award of a judgment against the guardian or former guardian in favor of the surety;

(C) an action against a former guardian of the former ward that is brought by a surety that is called on to perform in place of the former guardian;

(D) a claim for the payment of compensation, expenses, and court costs, and any other matter authorized under Chapter 1155 and Subpart H, Part 2, Subtitle Z; and

(E) a matter related to an authorization made or duty performed by a guardian under Chapter 1204; and

(7) the appointment of a trustee for a trust created under Section 1301.053 or 1301.054, the settling of an account of the trustee, and all other matters relating to the trust.

(b) For purposes of this code, in a county in which there is ***a statutory probate court***, a matter related to a guardianship proceeding includes:

(1) all matters and actions described in Subsection (a);

(2) a suit, action, or application filed against or on behalf of a guardianship or a trustee of a trust created under Section 1301.053 or 1301.054; and

(3) a cause of action in which a guardian in a guardianship pending in the statutory probate court is a party.

TEX. ESTATES CODE § 1021.001(emphasis added).

These Sections are important as the jurisdiction of contested guardianship proceedings are now based on these definitions. Estates Code Section 1022.003 through 1022.006 provides which court will have jurisdiction depending on if the county has a county court, county court at law and/or statutory probate court.

For example, Section 1022.005 provides that “a statutory probate court has *exclusive jurisdiction of all guardianship proceedings*, regardless of whether contested or uncontested.” TEX. ESTATES CODE 1022.005 (emphasis added). Section 1022.005 also provides that a “*cause of action related to a guardianship proceeding of which the statutory probate court has exclusive jurisdiction* as provided by Subsection (a) *must be brought in the statutory probate court* unless the jurisdiction of the statutory probate court is concurrent with the jurisdiction of a district court as provided by Section 1022.006 or with the jurisdiction of any other court.” *See Id.* (emphasis added).

In contrast, counties with only a county court, the court may:

- (1) request the assignment of a statutory probate court judge to hear the contested matter, as provided by Section 25.0022, Government Code; or
- (2) transfer the contested matter to the district court, which may then hear the contested matter as if originally filed in the district court.

TEX. ESTATES CODE 1022.003.

And, when the county has a county court at law, the “county court may, on the judge's own motion, or shall, on the motion of any party to the proceeding, transfer the contested matter to the county court at law. In addition, the judge of the county court, on the judge's own motion or on the motion of a party to the proceeding, may transfer the entire proceeding to the county court at law.” TEX. ESTATES CODE 1022.004.

B. Jurisdictional Conflicts Between Family Court and Probate Court

The overlapping jurisdiction of Texas family courts and Texas probate courts has been the subject of much discussion and debate. Unfortunately, little has been done to clarify the jurisdictional issues between

these two courts. A discussion of the most common conflicts follows.

1. CONTESTED GUARDIANSHIP OF MINOR’S PERSON

Section 1022.008 authorizes a probate judge to transfer the contested guardianship of a minor’s *person* to a court of competent jurisdiction where a suit affecting the parent/child relationship (“SAPCR”) is pending. Typically, this is in a family district court. *See* TEX. ESTATES CODE § 1022.008. While Section 1022.008 attempts to deal with conflicting issues involving the custody or right to custody of a minor, there is no similar provision relating to a contested guardianship of a minor’s *estate*. Thus, the transferring court (i.e. the probate court) retains jurisdiction over the minor ward’s estate and even over another minor who may also be the subject of the suit.

2. CONTESTED GUARDIANSHIP OF ADULT DISABLED CHILD

Jurisdictional issues often arise between the family and probate courts when a disabled child, that was previously the subject of a SAPCR, reaches majority. The primary issue is whether the family court retains jurisdiction over issues relating to the adult disabled child’s person and/or estate, or the probate court assumes jurisdiction.

Some have argued that Section 154.309 of the Texas Family Code grants the family court that originally presided over the SAPCR continuing, exclusive jurisdiction over the adult disabled child. A careful review of Section 154.309 of the Texas Family Code, addressing the possession of or access to an adult disabled child, reveals that it is located under the chapter entitled “Child Support” and the subchapter entitled “Support for a Minor or Adult Disabled Child.” It is not under the chapter of the Texas Family Code that relates to possession or access provisions. *See* TEX. FAM. CODE § 154.309. In contrast, the Texas Estates Code provides that all applications for guardianship must be filed with the court presiding over guardianship proceedings. *See* discussion *supra*.

One of a few opinions or cases to address this issue is *Garland v. Garland*, 868 S.W.2d 847 (Tex. App. – Dallas 1993, no writ). In *Garland*, a family district court appointed a managing conservator for a mentally incapacitated child which continued after the child reached the age of eighteen (18). The child’s father subsequently filed an application for guardianship in a statutory probate court in Dallas County, Texas upon the child reaching majority. The child’s mother, who

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