



## **Summary of HB 2249—Pre-Divorce Parent Education Law (Effective Nov. 1, 2014)**

### Why was the Bill passed?

HB 2249 was passed to provide parents educational information regarding the impact divorce has on children, especially related to the critical child well-being issues to be covered. Judges already have the option of requiring divorcing parents to attend programs on parenting after divorce; HB 2249 simply enhances such programs to also include the important consideration of impact on children.

### What does the bill actually do?

HB 2249 *only* applies when couples file for divorce—1) based on incompatibility and 2) have children under the age 18.

In such cases, parents must attend, separately or together, an educational program concerning the impact of divorce on children including a focus on the following important issues:

- Short and long-term effects of divorce on child well-being,
- Reconciliation as an optional outcome,
- Effects of family violence,
- Potential child behaviors and emotional issues during and after divorce,
- How parents should respond to the child's behavioral and emotional needs,
- Communication strategies to reduce conflict and facilitate cooperative co-parenting; and
- Area resources, including but not limited to nonprofit and/or religious organizations

available to address issues of substance abuse or other addictions, family violence, behavioral health, individual and couples counseling, and financial planning.

### Do the educational programs cost anything?

The programs can cost from \$15 to \$60 in order to offset the cost incurred by program providers.

What happens once someone completes the course?

A certificate of completion will be issued so the person can file it with the court to show compliance.

When does the educational program have to be completed in relation to the divorce proceedings?

The educational program should be completed prior to a judge entering an initial “temporary order” or within 45 days of receiving a temporary order. However, a final determination of child custody will not be able to occur until the parties complete the educational program.

What if there are concerns about the safety of either of the parties related to attending the program?

It *cannot* be stressed enough that the safety of spouses and children is of utmost concern and importance. Thus, the law specifically allows a judge to waive attendance of the educational program for “good cause shown” which would *obviously* include safety concerns and family violence issues. Additionally, online courses are already available and qualify to meet the educational program requirements. Such online courses provide a viable option for participating safely should a judge not waive program attendance.

Where can couples or individuals find more information about possible programs?

Fortunately, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (also known as Project Relate because of its diverse programming options for couples, individuals, families, youth, and co-parents) has created a helpful website that provides extensive information on available programs including online options.

The website address is: <http://www.projectrelate.com/divorce>

Judges should allow couples the opportunity to travel to neighboring counties that offer live, in-person programs, especially if a county does not have any educational programs offered or if safety issues are present for an individual in a particular county.

Are churches or other faith-based organizations allowed to participate in providing services?

Yes. As long as the program addresses the required issues as listed previously, an organization can become a provider regardless of religious affiliation. It will be up to the judge or county to determine if the program is satisfactory to be offered in the county. Additionally, a faith-based organization can be listed as an “Area Resource” to provide services related to “substance abuse or other addictions, family violence, behavioral health, individual and couples counseling, and financial planning.”

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