

No. 1977-20

AN ACT

SB 163

Providing for the custody of children.

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The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania hereby enacts as follows:

Section 1. Short title.

This act shall be known and may be cited as the "Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act."

Section 2. Purposes of act; construction of provisions.

(a) The general purposes of this act are to:

(1) avoid jurisdictional competition and conflict with courts of other states in matters of child custody which have in the past resulted in the

shifting of children from state to state with harmful effects on their well-being;

(2) promote cooperation with the courts of other states to the end that a custody decree is rendered in that state which can best decide the case in the interest of the child;

(3) assure that litigation concerning the custody of a child take place ordinarily in the state with which the child and his family have the closest connection and where significant evidence concerning his care, protection, training, and personal relationships is most readily available, and that courts of this State decline the exercise of jurisdiction when the child and his family have a closer connection with another state;

(4) discourage continuing controversies over child custody in the interest of greater stability of home environment and of secure family relationships for the child;

(5) deter abductions and other unilateral removals of children undertaken to obtain custody awards;

(6) avoid relitigation of custody decisions of other states in this State insofar as feasible;

(7) facilitate the enforcement of custody decrees of other states;

(8) promote and expand the exchange of information and other forms of mutual assistance between the courts of this State and those of other states concerned with the same child; and

(9) make uniform the law of those states which enact it.

(b) This act shall be construed to promote the general purposes stated in this section.

Section 3. Definitions.

The following words and phrases when used in this act shall have, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, the meanings given to them in this section:

“Contestant.” An institution or a person, including a parent, who claims a right to custody or visitation rights with respect to a child.

“Custody determination.” A court decision and court orders and instructions providing for the custody of a child, including visitation rights; it does not include a decision relating to child support or any other monetary obligation of any person.

“Custody proceeding.” The term includes proceedings in which a custody determination is one of several issues, such as an action for divorce or separation, and includes child neglect and dependency proceedings.

“Decree” or “custody decree.” A custody determination contained in a judicial decree or order made in a custody proceeding, and includes an initial decree and a modification decree.

“Home state.” The state in which the child immediately preceding the time involved lived with his parents, a parent, in an institution or a person acting as parent, for at least six consecutive months, and in the case of a child less than six months old the state in which the child lived from birth with any of the persons mentioned. Periods of temporary absence of any of the named persons are counted as part of the six-month or other period.

“Initial decree.” The first custody decree concerning a particular child.

“Modification decree.” A custody decree which modifies or replaces a prior decree, whether made by the court which rendered the prior decree or by another court.

“Physical custody.” Actual possession and control of a child.

“Person acting as parent.” A person, including an institution other than a parent, who has physical custody of a child and who has either been awarded custody by a court or claims a right to custody.

“State.” Any Commonwealth, state, territory, or possession of the United States, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia.

Section 4. Jurisdiction.

(a) A court of this State which is competent to decide child custody matters has jurisdiction to make a child custody determination by initial or modification decree if:

(1) this State:

(i) is the home state of the child at the time of commencement of the proceeding; or

(ii) had been the child's home state within six months before commencement of the proceeding and the child is absent from this State because of his removal or retention by a person claiming his custody or for other reasons, and a parent or person acting as parent continues to live in this State;

(2) it is in the best interest of the child that a court of this State assume jurisdiction because:

(i) the child and his parents, or the child and at least one contestant, have a significant connection with this State; and

(ii) there is available in this State substantial evidence concerning the child's present or future care, protection, training, and personal relationships;

(3) the child is physically present in this State, and:

(i) the child has been abandoned; or

(ii) it is necessary in an emergency to protect the child because he has been subjected to or threatened with mistreatment or abuse or is otherwise neglected or dependent;

(4) (i) it appears that no other state would have jurisdiction under prerequisites substantially in accordance with paragraphs (1), (2) or (3), or another state has declined to exercise jurisdiction on the ground that this State is the more appropriate forum to determine the custody of the child; and

(ii) it is in the best interest of the child that this court assume jurisdiction; or

(5) the child welfare agencies of the counties wherein the contestants for the child live, have made an investigation of the home of the person to whom custody is awarded and have found it to be satisfactory for the welfare of the child.

(b) Except under subsection (a)(3) and (4), physical presence in this

State of the child, or of the child and one of the contestants, is not alone sufficient to confer jurisdiction on a court of this State to make a child custody determination.

(c) Physical presence of the child, while desirable, is not a prerequisite for jurisdiction to determine his custody.

Section 5. Notice and opportunity to be heard.

Before making a decree under this act, reasonable notice and opportunity to be heard shall be given to the contestants, any parent whose parental rights have not been previously terminated, and any person who has physical custody of the child. If any of these persons is outside this State, notice and opportunity to be heard shall be given pursuant to section 6.

Section 6. Notice to persons outside this State; submission to jurisdiction.

(a) Notice required for the exercise of jurisdiction over a person outside this State shall be given in a manner reasonably calculated to give actual notice, and may be:

(1) by personal delivery outside this State in the manner prescribed for service of process within this State;

(2) in the manner prescribed by the law of the place in which the service is made for service of process in that place in an action in any of its courts of general jurisdiction;

(3) by any form of mail addressed to the person to be served and requesting a receipt; or

(4) as directed by the court including publication, if other means of notification are ineffective.

(b) Notice under this section shall be served, mailed, or delivered or last published at least ten days before any hearing in this State.

(c) Proof of service outside this State may be made by affidavit of the individual who made the service, or in the manner prescribed by the law of this State, the order pursuant to which the service is made, or the law of the place in which the service is made. If service is made by mail, proof may be a receipt signed by the addressee or other evidence of delivery to the addressee.

(d) Notice is not required if a person submits to the jurisdiction of the court.

Section 7. Simultaneous proceedings in other states.

(a) A court of this State shall not exercise its jurisdiction under this act if at the time of filing the petition a proceeding concerning the custody of the child was pending in a court of another state exercising jurisdiction substantially in conformity with this act, unless the proceeding is stayed by the court of the other state because this State is a more appropriate forum or for other reasons.

(b) Before hearing the petition in a custody proceeding the court shall examine the pleadings and other information supplied by the parties under section 10 and shall consult the child custody registry established under

section 17 concerning the pendency of proceedings with respect to the child in other states. If the court has reason to believe that proceedings may be pending in another state it shall direct an inquiry to the state court administrator or other appropriate official of the other state.

(c) If the court is informed during the course of the proceeding that a proceeding concerning the custody of the child was pending in another state before the court assumed jurisdiction it shall stay the proceeding and communicate with the court in which the other proceeding is pending to the end that the issue may be litigated in the more appropriate forum and that information be exchanged in accordance with sections 20 through 23. If a court of this State has made a custody decree before being informed of a pending proceeding in a court of another state it shall immediately inform that court of the fact. If the court is informed that a proceeding was commenced in another state after it assumed jurisdiction it shall likewise inform the other court to the end that the issues may be litigated in the more appropriate forum.

Section 8. Inconvenient forum.

(a) A court which has jurisdiction under this act to make an initial or modification decree may decline to exercise its jurisdiction anytime before making a decree if it finds that it is an inconvenient forum to make a custody determination under the circumstances of the case and that a court of another state is a more appropriate forum.

(b) A finding of inconvenient forum may be made upon the court's own motion or upon motion of a party or a guardian ad litem or other representative of the child.

(c) In determining if it is an inconvenient forum, the court shall consider if it is in the interest of the child that another state assume jurisdiction. For this purpose it may take into account the following factors, among others:

- (1) if another state is or recently was the child's home state;
- (2) if another state has a closer connection with the child and his family or with the child and one or more of the contestants;
- (3) if substantial evidence concerning the child's present or future care, protection, training, and personal relationships is more readily available in another state;
- (4) if the parties have agreed on another forum which is no less appropriate; and
- (5) if the exercise of jurisdiction by a court of this State would contravene any of the purposes stated in section 2.

(d) Before determining whether to decline or retain jurisdiction the court may communicate with a court of another state and exchange information pertinent to the assumption of jurisdiction by either court with a view to assuring that jurisdiction will be exercised by the more appropriate court and that a forum will be available to the parties.

(e) If the court finds that it is an inconvenient forum and that a court of another state is a more appropriate forum it may dismiss the proceedings,

or it may stay the proceedings upon condition that a custody proceeding be promptly commenced in another named state or upon any other conditions which may be just and proper, including the condition that a moving party stipulate his consent and submission to the jurisdiction of the other forum.

(f) The court may decline to exercise its jurisdiction under this act if a custody determination is incidental to an action for divorce or another proceeding while retaining jurisdiction over the divorce or other proceeding.

(g) If it appears to the court that it is clearly an inappropriate forum it may require the party who commenced the proceedings to pay, in addition to the costs of the proceedings in this State, necessary travel and other expenses, including attorneys' fees, incurred by other parties or their witnesses. Payment is to be made to the prothonotary for remittance to the proper party.

(h) Upon dismissal or stay of proceedings under this section the court shall inform the court found to be the more appropriate forum of this fact, or if the court which would have jurisdiction in the other state is not certainly known, shall transmit the information to the court administrator or other appropriate official for forwarding to the appropriate court.

(i) Any communication received from another state informing this State of a finding of inconvenient forum because a court of this State is the more appropriate forum shall be filed in the custody registry of the appropriate court. Upon assuming jurisdiction the court of this State shall inform the original court of this fact.

Section 9. Jurisdiction declined by reason of conduct.

(a) If the petitioner for an initial decree has wrongfully taken the child from another state or has engaged in conduct intending to benefit his position in a custody hearing conduct the court may decline to exercise jurisdiction if this is just and proper under the circumstances.

(b) Unless required in the interest of the child, the court shall not exercise its jurisdiction to modify a custody decree of another state if the petitioner, without consent of the person entitled to custody, has improperly removed the child from the physical custody of the person entitled to custody or has improperly retained the child after a visit or other temporary relinquishment of physical custody. If the petitioner has violated any other provision of a custody decree of another state the court may decline to exercise its jurisdiction unless the petitioner can show that conditions in the custodial household are physically or emotionally harmful to the child, the burden of proof being on the petitioner requesting the court to take jurisdiction.

(c) In appropriate cases a court dismissing a petition under this section may charge the petitioner with necessary travel and other expenses, including attorneys' fees, incurred by other parties or their witnesses.

Section 10. Information under oath to be submitted to the court.

(a) Every party in a custody proceeding in his first pleading or in an

affidavit attached to that pleading shall give information under oath as to the child's present address, the places where the child has lived within the last five years, and the names and present addresses of the persons with whom the child has lived during that period. In this pleading or affidavit every party shall further declare under oath whether:

(1) he has participated (as a party, witness, or in any other capacity) in any other litigation concerning the custody of the same child in this or any other state;

(2) he has information of any custody proceeding concerning the child pending in a court of this or any other state; and

(3) he knows of any person not a party to the proceedings who has physical custody of the child or claims to have custody or visitation rights with respect to the child.

(b) If the declaration as to any of the above items is in the affirmative the declarant shall give additional information under oath as required by the court. The court may examine the parties under oath as to details of the information furnished and as to other matters pertinent to the court's jurisdiction and the disposition of the case.

(c) Each party has a continuing duty to inform the court of any custody proceeding concerning the child in this or any other state of which he obtained information during this proceeding.

Section 11. Additional parties.

If the court learns from information furnished by the parties pursuant to section 10 or from other sources that a person not a party to the custody proceeding has physical custody of the child or claims to have custody or visitation rights with respect to the child, it shall order that person to be joined as a party and to be duly notified of the pendency of the proceeding and of his joinder as a party. If the person joined as a party is outside this State he shall be served with process or otherwise notified in accordance with section 6.

Section 12. Appearance of parties and the child.

(a) The court may order any party to the proceeding who is in this State to appear personally before the court. If that party has physical custody of the child the court may order that he appear personally with the child.

(b) If a party to the proceeding whose presence is desired by the court is outside this State with or without the child the court may order that the notice given under section 6 include a statement directing that party to appear personally with or without the child and declaring that failure to appear may result in a decision adverse to that party.

(c) If a party to the proceeding who is outside this State is directed to appear under subsection (b) or desires to appear personally before the court with or without the child, the court may require another party to pay travel and other necessary expenses of the party so appearing and of the child if this is just and proper under the circumstances.

Section 13. Binding force and res judicata effect of custody decree.

A custody decree rendered by a court of this State which had jurisdiction under section 4 binds all parties who have been served in this State or notified in accordance with section 6 or who have submitted to the jurisdiction of the court, and who have been given an opportunity to be heard. As to these parties the custody decree is conclusive as to all issues of law and fact decided and as to the custody determination made unless and until that determination is modified pursuant to law, including the provisions of this act.

Section 14. Recognition of out-of-state custody decrees.

The courts of this State shall recognize and enforce an initial or modification decree of a court of another state which had assumed jurisdiction under statutory provisions substantially in accordance with this act or which was made under factual circumstances meeting the jurisdictional standards of the act, so long as this decree has not been modified in accordance with jurisdictional standards substantially similar to those of this act.

Section 15. Modification of custody decree of another state.

(a) If a court of another state has made a custody decree, a court of this State shall not modify that decree unless:

(1) it appears to the court of this State that the court which rendered the decree does not now have jurisdiction under jurisdictional prerequisites substantially in accordance with this act or has declined to assume jurisdiction to modify the decree; and

(2) the court of this State has jurisdiction.

(b) If a court of this State is authorized under subsection (a) and section 9 to modify a custody decree of another state it shall give due consideration to the transcript of the record and other documents of all previous proceedings submitted to it in accordance with section 23.

Section 16. Filing and enforcement of custody decree of another state.

(a) A certified copy of a custody decree of another state whose decrees are recognized under section 14 may be filed in the office of the prothonotary of any court of common pleas of this State. The prothonotary shall treat the decree in the same manner as a custody decree of the court of common pleas of this State. A custody decree so filed has the same effect and shall be enforced in like manner as a custody decree rendered by a court of this State.

(b) A person violating a custody decree of another state which makes it necessary to enforce the decree in this State may be required to pay necessary travel and other expenses, including attorneys' fees, incurred by the party entitled to the custody or his witnesses.

Section 17. Registry of out-of-state custody decrees and proceedings.

The prothonotary of each court of common pleas shall maintain a registry in which he shall enter the following:

- (1) certified copies of custody decrees of other states received for filing;
- (2) communications as to the pendency of custody proceedings in other states;
- (3) communications concerning a finding of inconvenient forum by a court of another state; and
- (4) other communications or documents concerning custody proceedings in another state which may affect the jurisdiction of a court of this State or the disposition to be made by it in a custody proceeding.

Section 18. Certified copies of custody decree.

The prothonotary of the court of common pleas of this State, at the request of the court of another state or at the request of any person who is affected by or has a legitimate interest in a custody decree, shall certify and forward a copy of the decree to that court or person.

Section 19. Taking testimony in another state.

In addition to other procedural devices available to a party, any party to the proceeding or a guardian ad litem or other representative of the child may adduce testimony of witnesses, including parties and the child, by deposition or otherwise, in another state. The court on its own motion may direct that the testimony of a person be taken in another state and may prescribe the manner in which and the terms upon which the testimony shall be taken.

Section 20. Hearings and studies in another state; orders to appear.

(a) A court of this State may request the appropriate court of another state to hold a hearing to adduce evidence, to order a party to produce or give evidence under other procedures of that state, or to have social studies made with respect to the custody of a child involved in proceedings pending in the court of this State; and to forward to the court of this State certified copies of the transcript of the record of the hearing, the evidence otherwise adduced, or any social studies prepared in compliance with the request. The cost of the services may be assessed against the parties or, if necessary, ordered paid by the county.

(b) A court of this State may request the appropriate court of another state to order a party to custody proceedings pending in the court of this State to appear in the proceedings, and if that party has physical custody of the child, to appear with the child. The request may state that travel and other necessary expenses of the party and of the child whose appearance is desired will be assessed against another party or will otherwise be paid.

Section 21. Assistance to courts of other states.

(a) Upon request of the court of another state the courts of this State which are competent to hear custody matters may order a person in this State to appear at a hearing to adduce evidence or to produce or give evidence under other procedures available in this State or may order social studies to be made for use in a custody proceeding in another state. A

certified copy of the transcript of the record of the hearing or the evidence otherwise adduced, any psychological studies and any social studies prepared shall be forwarded to the requesting court.

(b) A person within this State may voluntarily give his testimony or statement in this State for use in a custody proceeding outside this State.

(c) Upon request of the court of another state a competent court of this State may order a person in this State to appear alone or with the child in a custody proceeding in another state. The court may condition compliance with the request upon assurance by the other state that state travel and other necessary expenses will be advanced or reimbursed.

Section 22. Preservation of documents for use in other states.

In any custody proceeding in this State the court shall preserve the pleadings, orders and decrees, any record that has been made of its hearings, social studies, and other pertinent documents until the child reaches 18 years of age. Upon appropriate request of the court of another state the court shall forward to the other court certified copies of any or all of such documents.

Section 23. Request for court records of another state.

If a custody decree has been rendered in another state concerning a child involved in a custody proceeding pending in a court of this State, the court of this State upon taking jurisdiction of the case shall request of the court of the other state a certified copy of the transcript of any court record and other documents mentioned in section 22.

Section 24. International application.

The general policies of this act extend to the international area. The provisions of this act relating to the recognition and enforcement of custody decrees of other states apply to custody decrees and decrees involving legal institutions similar in nature to custody institutions rendered by appropriate authorities of other nations if reasonable notice and opportunity to be heard were given to all affected persons.

Section 25. Priority.

Upon the request of a party to a custody proceeding which raises a question of existence or exercise of jurisdiction under this act the case shall be given calendar priority and handled expeditiously.

Section 26. Repeal.

All acts and parts of acts are repealed insofar as inconsistent with this act.

Section 27. Effective date.

This act shall take effect July 1, 1977.

APPROVED—The 30th day of June, A.D. 1977.

MILTON J. SHAPP