Judge begins to unwind conflicts in Ventura County conservatorship cases

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For years, a fiduciary in Ventura County has been directing her clients' money to her husband's law firm and health care company, all with the court's approval. A newly appointed judge has begun to unwind the arrangements weeks after a CalMatters' investigation exposed the conflicts of interest.

Ventura County Probate Judge Gilbert Romero ruled that Angelique Friend violated court rules in three cases when she hired her husband, David Esquibias, as her attorney, and her clients paid the bill. The judge ordered her to stop hiring Esquibias as her attorney and Townsgate In-Home Services, Esquibias' company. Romero blocked Esquibias from collecting attorney's fees in the three cases.

"Here, the conservator hiring her spouse as her attorney and paying his fees from the estate reasonably could create the appearance of a conflict of interest and be perceived as self-serving," Romero wrote in a ruling.

The judge also suspended Friend as the trustee in a fourth case after beneficiaries of the Mettler Trust argued that she breached her fiduciary duties by paying Townsgate $1.1 million from the trust from 2021 to 2025. They are asking the court to force Friend to reimburse the estate.

Friend argued that she disclosed her connection to Townsgate and that she has no ownership interest in the company. A hearing for the case is scheduled for July.

Romero started a March 23 hearing by establishing a timeline of Friend and Esquibias' relationship and when it was formally disclosed. The more questions he asked, the more testy Esquibias became. The attorney called the judge's line of questioning "rather sickening."

"I am helpless to protect her," Esquibias said of his wife. "I should tell the court, 'Do not question my client.'"

Romero responded, "Doesn't that go to the conflict?"

In one case, Friend became the conservator over Brenna Clark's estate in 2014, court records show, and Esquibias represented Friend before they married. They never formally disclosed their dating relationship on the record, only orally, Esquibias told the court.

Romero said that was a problem, even though the previous judge allowed it. That judge, Roger Lund, was reassigned last fall, weeks after CalMatters began asking questions about the arrangement.

"As soon as you and Mrs. Friend started a dating relationship, that was a violation of the rule of court," Romero said. "I think your services should have been terminated at that point."

Esquibias expressed shock that his work relationship with Friend had now become an issue after years of the court's approval.

"It was something that was actually celebrated in this very courtroom by colleagues … who attended my wedding," Esquibias said. Indeed, retired Judge Glen M. Reiser signed their marriage license in 2019.

The judge also considered disallowing Townsgate's payments in one case, but he gave Friend a chance to show that Townsgate's hiring was in the best interest of her client. The judge is scheduled to rehear that case on May 4.

The CalMatters investigation found that Lund approved Friend and Esquibias's arrangement for years, even as family members complained. Court records show the couple brought in about $3 million from 2019 to 2025 from clients in the six

cases CalMatters reviewed; $2.7 million went to Townsgate, even though court rules and the California Professional Fiduciary Bureau's code of conduct generally prohibit such conflicts.

Nearly three weeks after the story ran, in a rare move, Romero brought his own motion to reconsider the attorney's fees and Townsgate costs he'd recently approved. Romero noted that he could only review approvals that he'd signed, and he couldn't do anything about the years of approvals that came before him.

"I have an obligation to correct myself," Romero said.

In an email, Friend said "these relationships were disclosed from the outset, repeatedly presented to the court, and previously approved."

"While I respect the new judge's ruling and have taken immediate steps to comply going forward, including retaining new counsel and replacing the care provider company," she wrote, "I disagree with applying that new view retroactively to arrangements that were fully disclosed and previously approved."

She said they are "evaluating the next legal steps to formally dispute the retroactive rulings."

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