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Former Denver court clerk blew whistle 10 years ago about conservatorship system

Clerk won a settlement in a wrongful termination lawsuit

It's been 10 years since Caroline Cammack lost her job at Denver's Probate Court and spoke out against a guardianship and conservatorship system she said was failing to protect vulnerable Coloradans from abuse.

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DENVER — It's been 10 years since Caroline Cammack lost her job at Denver's Probate Court and spoke out against a guardianship and

conservatorship system she said was failing to protect vulnerable Coloradans from abuse.

“They fired me because I was a whistleblower. I just can’t believe that in this country we can’t protect our vulnerable citizens,” she said. “I don’t think anything has changed.”

Today, Denver7 Investigates found the same system continues to bleed estates with little oversight despite warnings from people such as Cammack about the broken system that went unheeded.

“It was the money that was lost — and we’re talking about millions of dollars in some estates,” Cammack said. “The real tragedy of it all is that they continue to do this.”

It starts with a petition to the court, something anyone can file if they think a person is mentally unfit to handle their life. If a judge agrees, and no family members can step in, they can place the person under either guardianship or conservatorship with, essentially, a stranger who then has control over all aspects of a person’s life and finances.

Guardians are responsible for taking care of a person’s medical and personal needs, while a conservator handles all their finances and legal decisions. They can each charge large fees to the family’s estate for doing work on their behalf.

“These conservators, once they’re appointed, it’s really hard to get them removed,” Cammack said. “The attorneys charge $300 an hour.”

It’s similar to what has played out publicly with pop singer Britney Spears. Her father had been her sole conservator for 13 years and a law

firm charged her estate millions of dollars in legal fees. A judge suspended Jamie Spears as her conservator in September.

Cammack said Denver's Probate Court hired her as a clerk to review conservatorship reports and flag suspect documents after a scathing audit in 2006.

The audit found guardians or conservators were failing to file the necessary court reports and many were charging estates excessive fees.

"And so, they hired me to come in and 'clean up the mess,'" she said.

Other audits in 2011 and 2017, both coming after Cammack was fired, found the same problems, and the same warnings were ignored.

"Nothing has been done," Cammack said.

Cammack said during her time as a clerk she found guardians failing to file reports with the courts for years, and one even lost track of an HIV-positive man who was out having unprotected sex.

"There had been no report filed in five years where we did not know where he was," she said of that circumstance. "And for a matter of public safety, we needed to know where he was."

Cammack believes she was fired for what she uncovered and filed a wrongful termination lawsuit which ended in a settlement.

"I got $10,000. I thought this would be the catalyst to getting something done about all this wrongdoing," she said.

But after seeing previous Denver7 stories on the matter, she said she believes the same problems clearly still exist and are being ignored.

Family after family in Colorado have already come forward with their own stories of losing everything.

Denver7 Investigates first told the story of twin brothers Greg and David Wells.

The probate court placed their mother, Sharon Wells, under guardianship, and court records show how quickly her money started disappearing.

“Her golden years have been turned into a nightmare,” Greg Wells previously told Denver7.

During an 18-month period, records show the conservator charged nearly $150,000 to Sharon Wells, making up to $325 an hour for taking care of her estate. Items included tasks like answering emails, phone calls and managing her properties.

A Colorado lawmaker wants more accountability and transparency in the state’s guardianship system after Denver7’s reporting.

State Rep. Kim Ransom, R-Douglas County, said she is looking to introduce legislation next session that would better protect those under guardianship or conservatorship. It would also provide a cap on the fees guardians and conservators can charge estates.

“There has to be a better way,” Ransom said. “They need to have some type of oversight and there really needs to be some accountability for these guardians.”

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