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Chief judge investigating Post's findings on Colin, Savitt

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By **John Pacenti** - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

The chief judge for Palm Beach County said Wednesday that he is investigating what needs to be done to address concerns brought forth by **The Palm Beach Post's** stories on Circuit Judge Martin Colin's role in adult guardianship.



Circuit Judge Jeffrey Colbath said in an email to The Post that he is in fact-finding mode and “is preparing to make appropriate changes to address concerns.”



Colin oversees family and probate matters in Delray Beach, including guardianships of adults no longer able to care for themselves. Colin's wife, Elizabeth "Betsy" Savitt, is a former tennis pro turned professional guardian who operates in the

,Elizabeth Savitt appears at a hearing with Attorney Sheri Hazeltine to discuss attorney fees for Albert Bach on Thursday, August 20, ... [Read More](#)

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same division and appears in front of Colin’s colleagues.

But Colbath and the chief judge before him, Peter Blanc, took no action to eliminate potential conflicts caused by the close relationships in the south county courthouse.

Colbath has the power to transfer Colin out of the Probate & Guardianship Division, where he has been since about 2009. He also has the power to transfer Circuit Judge David French, who has been a close friend of both Colin and Savitt and oversees many of her guardianships.



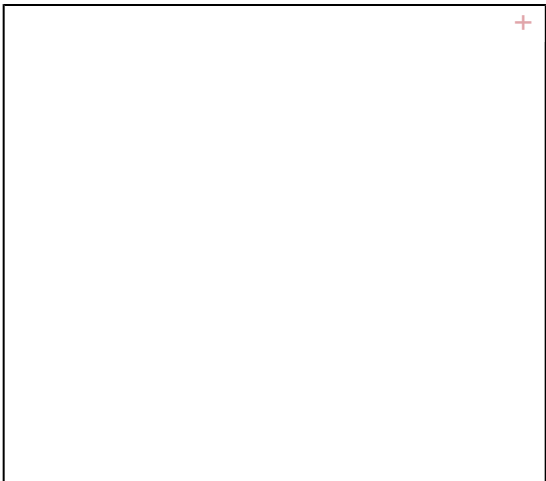
Judge Martin Colin presides over a hearing on Thursday, August 20, 2015, at the South County Courthouse in Delray Beach. Judge ... [Read More](#)

The Post found Colin’s colleagues must approve Savitt’s fees and fees for attorneys who represent her in guardianships of incapacitated senior citizens, many with sizable life savings. Families have accused Savitt, a guardian since 2011,

of double-billing, taking fees without prior court approval and pursuing unnecessary litigation to drum up fees.

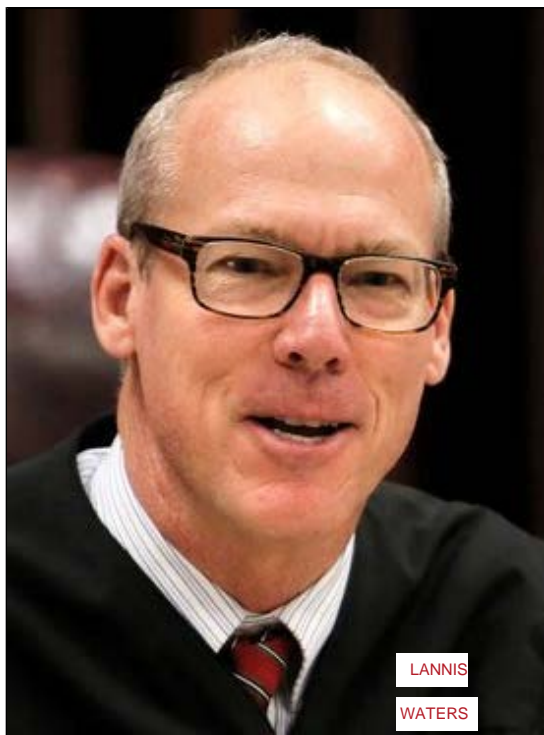
Several families separately told The Post that Savitt openly cites her husband’s powerful position when confronted over her actions.

Savitt does not appear directly in front of her husband, but the attorneys who represent her litigated cases in front of him and relied on him at times to approve lucrative fees.



Two former Florida Supreme Court justices and a legal ethics expert told The Post the relationships pose a conflict of interest and appear improper.

After The Post started investigating last year,



Palm Beach County Chief Circuit Judge Jeffrey Colbath

Colin recused himself from 115 cases in six months involving those attorneys who represent Savitt in guardianships, such as Ellen Morris, Sheri Hazeltine and John Pankauski, [The Post](#)

[reported Sunday](#). Previously, Colin said he required the attorneys to disclose their professional relationship with his wife, but The Post found that didn't happen in at least one case.

"We have adopted long-standing approved methods to properly deal with such potential conflicts," Colin told The Post.

Colbath has the power to transfer Colin or French out of the probate division. It's common for judges to be rotated every few years.

Savitt pointed out that she has never been sanctioned by any of her husband's colleagues and that complaints were from "disgruntled" family members. She also accused the paper of holding a grudge against her and her husband.

Families with seniors in Savitt's guardianships told The Post that their complaints about her financial management of seniors' life savings were ignored by Colin's colleagues, especially French.

Of particular issue is the tens of thousands of dollars Savitt has taken in fees prior to judicial approval in either guardianships or probate cases after the senior has died. Overwhelmingly, attorneys in the elder law field told The Post that state guardianship law does not allow guardians to take fees before a judge gives the OK.

This week it has been business as usual in Colin's courtroom in Delray Beach. Several attorneys told The Post they are not comfortable with the relationships in the probate division but fear repercussions if they speak out.

The families of some of Savitt's current and former wards did not hold back.

"They should be moved out of probate, and if possible, moved off the bench," said Jodi Rich, niece of Robert Paul Wein, who was in a Savitt guardianship before he died at 89 on Dec. 1.

"They are not abiding by ethical standards," she said.

Thomas Mayes, whose mother, Helen O'Grady, was in a Savitt guardianship, said there needs not only to be further guardianship reform by state lawmakers but a criminal investigation into Savitt. He doubted, though, anything would be done.

"They will just sweep the dirt under the rug or in a corner," he said.

Skender Hoti, a Lake Worth restaurant owner, watched Savitt in February 2012 try to assist a family guardian in seizing nearly every possession in a house he owned before she was stopped by sheriff's deputies.

"All their cases should be reviewed," he said of Colin and French. "No judge should be able not to rotate and stay in the probate arena."

What the Post found

Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Martin Colin is compromised by his wife's work as a professional guardian in the same probate and guardianship division where he has presided for years. His wife, Elizabeth "Betsy" Savitt, took fees without court approval and in some instances double-billed. Read all the stories and see the documents at myPalmBeachPost.com/guardianships-colin-savitt.

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