



Chairman Ginter, Vice Chair LaTourette, Ranking Member Boyd and all members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the substitute version of House Bill 523 you are considering today on behalf of the Ohio Counseling Association (OCA). OCA is the professional association representing licensed professional clinical counselors, licensed professional counselors, and school counselors throughout Ohio.

My name is Dr. Yegan Pillay and I am the current President of the Ohio Counseling Association. I am a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor and I have my Supervision designation by the Counselor, Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist Board.

HB 523 would make several healthcare professionals, including counselors, mandatory reporters of animal abuse. OCA applauds the efforts of the bill sponsors, Representatives Lanese and Perales, to bring this important issue forward. As counselors, our members understand that the abuse of animals is many times symptomatic of an additional mental health diagnosis or abuse tendencies. Reporting these abuses can be a tool to combat and prevent future abuses.

OCA is also supportive of the changes made in the substitute bill regarding the licensing of counselors. OCA has been working with the bill sponsors and the Counselor, Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist Board (CSWMFT) on these proposed changes.

Currently, Ohio law requires a CACREP degree from a clinical mental health counseling program, a clinical rehabilitation counseling program, or an addiction counseling program in order to qualify for licensure. CACREP is the national counselor program accredited body. While well intending, this language could unintentionally leave some qualified counselors ineligible for licensure.

The CSWMFT board has provided a public statement saying individuals not in clinical programs (school, rehabilitation, etc.) but who complete the clinical requirements are eligible for licensure. This amendment would clarify this interpretation in the language of the law, making this position more concrete, sustainable, and much more difficult to change if the board changes their view on ORC 4757.22 and 4757.23

Changing this language will ensure the continued access for qualified individuals to become licensed, in turn maximizing the number of qualified licensed professional counselors available to Ohio citizens.

Another change proposed in the substitute bill, would allow the CSWMFT Board to grant licensure by endorsement to certain out-of-state applicants. Ohio has long had one of the strongest licensure laws for counselors in the country. OCA is very proud of that fact. We believe strong licensure laws protect clients and provide a strong ethical professional identity for those practicing in our state. However, we also understand that applicants who have been practicing in other states should have path to licensure in Ohio if they meet and maintain Ohio's high qualifications and standards. OCA doesn't want qualified individuals denied licensure if they can demonstrate competency to uphold Ohio's strong standards.

Members of the committee, we thank you for considering the perspective of the Ohio Counseling Association. We hope you will favorably report this legislation to assist in protecting Ohioans and providing greater access to mental health services by counselors. I would happy be to answer any questions you may have.