

Proponent Testimony – HB 177
Ohio House Health Committee, Tuesday, June, 18, 2019
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Certified as an: Adult Nurse Practitioner; Gerontological Nurse Practitioner;
Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner

Chairman Merrin, Vice Chairman Manning, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the House Health Committee, my name is Michele Pirc and I am pleased to have this opportunity to testify in support of H.B. 177, because my personal story demonstrates the devastating consequence of Ohio's Standard Care Arrangement (SCA) regulation that requires a signed physician contract for me to practice as an Advanced Practice Nurse and to provide mental health services to Ohioans in need in my Lake County Community.

I have 22 years of experience as an adult nurse practitioner with specializations in geriatrics and psychiatric mental health. I recently received my certification in psychiatric mental health so that I could provide mental health services to patients of all ages, because the shortage of mental health providers in Ohio is critical. Currently, there are 122 mental health provider shortage areas in Ohio and more than 2 ½ million Ohioans are not able to access mental health services. And, in Lake County, hospitals are seeing 30% more mental health patients than the state average. I have personally witnessed patients come in to a Lake County hospital emergency room who needed mental health services, and there was nowhere to send them. I have seen parents who had nowhere to bring their children for mental health care and they were desperate for a psychiatric referral but there was none to give them. In fact, waiting time to get an appointment with a psychiatrist can easily extend to 4-6 months and the waiting time for children is often longer. Ohio's Standard Care Arrangement contract requirement prevented me from taking care of these patients because after I received my Psychiatric certification there was no psychiatrist in the Lake County area and no physician available who would sign my SCA. My story demonstrates the devastating impact of the regulation that requires a signed physician contract in order for me to practice what I am educated and trained to do which is to provide mental health services to Ohioans in need in my Lake County community.

I have been a nurse practitioner since 1997 and I have worked with geriatric patients since 2002 in long-term care nursing homes and assisted living facilities. While working as a nurse practitioner in these facilities, with my expertise in geriatrics, I witnessed firsthand the disturbing impact of the Ohio mental health provider shortage and the lack of psychiatric specialists available to provide the necessary mental health care for these elderly patients. The lack of psychiatric services in Ohio for the elderly is a travesty. How would you feel if your parent was in a long term care facility with mental health issues and there was no one to care for them? Heartbreaking experiences led me to get my certification as a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner in 2018 in order to provide patients access to mental health care. After I received my specialist psychiatric certification as an advanced practice registered nurse, I quickly realized, after weeks of searching for a psychiatric collaborating physician, that my hopes and dreams of providing mental health services to this population would not be fulfilled because I was unable, after months of looking, to find a collaborating psychiatrist or a collaborating primary care physician. No one would sign a SCA for me to serve these patients. In Lake County, where the need for mental health care is great, there are few psychiatrists and no

primary care physicians who felt comfortable providing mental health services. Even after looking outside of my organization, I was unable to find a psychiatrist who was willing to sign the SCA. After a year of actively recruiting a physician collaborator with assistance from the Chief Medical Officer, I was finally able to find a Psychiatrist who was willing to sign my current SCA contract. The contract is very limiting since it only covers hospitalized patients. I was very grateful to have found this physician after a year of searching but he requested and specified in the SCA that I could only take care of patients in the inpatient hospital setting which prevents me from providing care to the patients living in long term care or assisted living facilities. The need in nursing facilities for mental health providers is even greater today as the residents are now younger, with many under 50 years of age. They are in even greater need of psychiatric services with many suffering from additional afflictions such as opiate addiction in addition to having complex mental illness.

So, even after years of education and after years of practice experience, I can only provide very limited mental health services because the Standard Care Arrangement regulation prevents me from practicing to the full extent of my education, preparation and experience. This regulation has prohibited me from providing mental health services to patients who have limited access to care in Lake County. I have personally witnessed delays in service due to the inability to place patients in appropriate mental health or addiction practices. I have also seen delays in treatment with children unable to get psychiatrist appointments following emergency room visits for mental health crisis due to the lack of available mental health care providers.

I went into advanced practice nursing to help patients in their time of need. I continue to try different avenues to improve access to care, but until the current SCA regulation is retired, this unnecessary mandate will continue to be a major obstacle that prevents our patients from getting the care they deserve, the care that can help them lead healthier and happier lives. I am asking you to support HB 177. Claims that removing the SCA will jeopardize patient safety are unfounded, and the right of Ohio's citizens to choose their health care provider should not be curtailed by short sighted and outdated thinking. HB 177 is the best choice for Ohio.