

December 5, 2022

The Ohio Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee

Re: HB 509, introduced amendment to address Social Work title protection

To Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Martin, and committee members,

Please accept this testimony to ask that the committee adopt Senator Antonio's amendment to HB 509 and remove the section of the bill that allows related degrees to be licensed as a social worker.

As a licensed social worker and longtime social work educator, I have deep concerns about the implications of this prospective change. Thousands of social workers in Ohio have gone to great lengths, and at great expense, to complete their social work degrees with the promise of title protection and with assurance that their degree would set them apart in qualifying them for state licensure. If this amendment is not adopted, these social workers would find themselves without any such protection, and with degrees that would be deemed considerably less valuable.

As a social work educator, I know firsthand how hard social work students work to complete their degrees, often in the face of financial strain and personal difficulties. I also see the tremendous value of this education in advancing their skills to address the complex needs of our communities.

Social work curricula focus specifically on the distinct skills of the social work profession, including skills in successful engagement, conducting assessments, goal development, and utilizing evidence-based interventions that are proven to be effective in creating change. Through their programs, social work students engage intensively around the issues of professional ethics, crisis interventions, public policy, human behavior, and so much more. They learn important strategies to address the impact of trauma and keep clients and communities safe. Furthermore, the signature pedagogy of social work is a required intensive year-long internship, focused on building hard skills in engaging and intervening with community members in need. Through this requirement, we ensure that all social workers enter the field with concrete experience and intensive hands-on learning. This is not the case with other related degrees.

While other helping professions bring important value to our communities, social work is a distinctive and specialized field of study and should be protected. This is especially true in Ohio, where bachelor's-level licensed social workers are granted a broad scope of practice that includes the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. If this proposed change advances, Ohio opens the door to community members unwittingly receiving treatment from individuals who have not received training in assessment, evidence-based interventions, and professional ethics. This puts all of us at serious risk, but especially the most vulnerable among us.

Finally, these changes to the bill would threaten Ohio's ability to enter the interstate compact which would open the door to more social workers practicing across state lines. Social work students who complete degrees in Ohio often choose to spend a portion of their careers practicing out-of-state. If this bill advances as written, social workers who are licensed in Ohio would likely face massive hurdles to becoming licensed in other states. This may lead to problems with student recruitment at Ohio-based universities, in addition to devaluing the efforts of hundreds of current students across the state.

We can all agree that workforce shortages are impacting access to services, and I believe that these changes were offered with good intention. However, this proposed solution would only lead to a much larger and more complex problem—the licensing of individuals who have not received sufficient training or experience, providing critical care to those facing the most difficult of life's problems. Please consider the implications of this change on your own family members and friends. Consider the level of expertise and training you would want your loved one to receive by a Social Worker at a hospital, community health facility, or school.

While the state must explore strategies to address behavioral health workforce shortages, this should not come at the expense of ensuring Ohioans access to quality care.

Protecting Social Work is a way to protect all of us in our time of need. Thank you for your consideration.

Rose Frech, MSW, LSW