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**Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Opponent Testimony for Substitute House Bill 509
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December 7, 2022**

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Martin, and Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony to Substitute House Bill 509, which seeks to change current licensing requirements for social workers.

As Ohio's federally designated domestic violence coalition, the Ohio Domestic Violence Network (ODVN) advances the principle that all people have the right to an oppression and violence-free life and advocates for changes in our economic, social, and political systems to empower communities statewide to prevent domestic violence. ODVN represents 76 local domestic violence organizations across the state. In 2021, ODVN programs provided 80,706 survivors and children with services, including emergency housing, advocacy, and counseling services.¹ Many of the domestic violence organizations that ODVN serves employ licensed social workers. Domestic violence survivors often interact with licensed social workers while seeking services such as housing and mental health care.

As Substitute House Bill 509 is currently written, it would allow people without degrees in social work to become licensed social workers. This change to current social work licensure requirements could result in serious harm to domestic violence victims, who are an already vulnerable population. Social work is a specific profession, and LSW's in Ohio cover a significant scope of practice, including the ability to diagnose and assess mental health disorders under supervision. Under the changes of Substitute HB 509, domestic violence survivors seeking mental health treatment could not be certain that they are receiving services from a person competently and fully trained in mental health diagnosis and treatment. Not only would this impact the credibility of the field of social work, sowing doubt in the public about social workers' competency, but it also would indelibly harm domestic violence survivors who would be exposed to professionals not adequately trained for their professional role.

In addition, Ohio Revised Code section 2151.421 regarding "Reporting child abuse or neglect" specifically designates a "person engaged in social work" as a mandated reporter of child abuse.² Accredited Baccalaureate-level social work programs are mandated by the Council on Social Work

¹ For calendar year 2021. [ODVNFactSheet June2022](#). Accessed November 2022.

² Ohio Rev. Code §2151.421

Education to cover specific competencies, including Competency 1 “Demonstrating Ethical and Professional Behavior”. This education on ethical practice is crucial in preparing licensed social workers to make appropriate and informed reports of child abuse and/or neglect when required under the law. These ethical decisions are rarely straightforward and can significantly harm domestic violence victims when made without proper guidance and education, like that of the education received by individuals with a bachelor’s degree in Social Work from an accredited program. NASW’s Code of Ethics establishes strong guidance for making ethical decisions such as breaking confidentiality due to mandated reporting requirements. Under Substitute House Bill 509, it is not guaranteed that persons with a degree other than social work will receive such crucial education or guidance from a professional code of ethics, leaving possible licensees underprepared to confront ethical dilemmas common in the domestic violence field.

In February, ODVN released a statewide survey of more than 500 domestic violence survivors to deepen our understanding of their experiences when seeking services and safety from law enforcement, courts, and social services agencies such as domestic violence programs.³ A significant finding of this report validated that confidentiality is a central concern for survivors and that expanding the definition of mandated reporters would negatively impact their ability to seek help in dangerous situations. By expanding the scope of those able to apply for social work licensure, Substitute HB 509 would expand that definition of persons who fall under the law of mandated reporters. ODVN opposes this action as it would chill a survivor’s access to medical, therapeutic, and advocacy services. ODVN’s programs follow all state and federal laws. They are funded under the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and receive other funding requiring it to adhere to certain standards of confidentiality. However, domestic violence survivors would no longer be able to trust that their confidentiality could be protected as thoroughly in the wake of the changes made under Substitute House Bill 509.

Our organization would like to express support for the amendment proposed by Senator Antonio, which would remove the section of Substitute HB 509 that would allow people without degrees in social work to become licensed as a social worker. This amendment would remediate ODVN’s concerns regarding Substitute HB 509. On behalf of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network and its 76 member programs, I would like to thank Senator Antonio for her dedication to domestic violence survivors and the defense of title protection laws to keep domestic violence survivors safer.

³ Seeking Safety, Equity, and Justice. 2021 Ohio Statewide Survey Results: Domestic Violence Survivors; Experiences with Law Enforcement, Courts, Child Welfare, and Social Service Systems. https://www.odvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Seeking_Safety_Equity_and_Justice_Appendices.pdf. Accessed December 2022.