

Dear Senators,

My name is MacKenzie Babics and I am a master's level licensed social worker in the state of Ohio. I live and work in Fairfield County (Lancaster) and am employed full-time as an emergency department social worker at Fairfield Medical Center. I also work as a contract therapist for National Youth Advocate Program's (NYAP) Columbus office. I am writing to urge you to adopt Senator Antonio's amendment that would remove the section of HB 509 that would allow for related degrees to obtain a social work license.

It is very important that I mention that I obtained my bachelor's degree in psychology. Immediately after graduation, I began working full-time for NYAP in 2019. I was unable to obtain an LSW, per Ohio law and CSWMFT board requirements. I received my LSW after the completion of my master's degree in social work earlier this year. As someone who would've qualified for an LSW under the new proposed legislation, I am still writing to urge you to consider adopting Senator Antonio's amendment to remove the related degree language.

Allowing non-social work degrees to be licensed as a social worker is very dangerous. Social workers are licensed to diagnose mental health disorders, provide therapy, and navigate complex systems to achieve positive patient outcomes. Our education specifically targets these critical areas so we have the knowledge to provide these services competently. Our education also requires us to participate in practicums and internships, both at the bachelor's and master's level. Other degrees (such as psychology) do not require these internships. Experience in the field is critical to obtain prior to licensure. I have deep concern that circumventing these requirements will lead to negative outcomes.

Unfortunately, a related degree is not enough to hold an LSW. For example, diagnosing mental health disorders is very serious. These diagnoses follow our clients into other areas and also influence medication decisions by doctors. In my experience, doctors who are prescribing mental health medications are looking to the client's therapists to verify the diagnosis. If someone does not have the necessary social work education to diagnose, clients could have a misdiagnosis. This could lead to interventions that are at best, not helpful. At worst, they could be harmful. Inappropriate medications could be given, therapeutic techniques for different conditions may not be effective, and people will eventually lose trust in therapists if the rate of improper treatment rises.

There are other serious ramifications for our profession if Senator Antonio's amendment is not adopted. There is current legislation for interstate licensure compacts. The Department of Defense granted 500,000 dollars for these compacts to be drafted in 2021. The State of Ohio could be blocked from these compacts, as other states require licensed social workers to have a social work education. Opening up interstate mobility would be incredibly helpful for our profession, especially with the rise of tele-therapy services after COVID-19. Being blocked from these compacts would greatly reduce the amount of people we can help, especially in rural areas where services are limited. I worry for my region, especially in the foothills of Appalachia. Services are very far and few between- limiting the ability for Ohio to enter these compacts severely limits options for our most vulnerable populations.

Looking back on my psychology degree, I firmly agree that I should not have been able to hold a license. While it did give me base knowledge of mental health conditions, it missed several critical points that my social work education gave me. My psychology education did not teach me how to diagnose, do therapy, navigate complex client systems, or require an internship.

I was able to provide supportive behavioral services to clients at NYAP during my time there, but I was unable to diagnose or provide therapy. This is exactly how it should have been. I could have misdiagnosed my clients, who were primarily foster children, which could have been detrimental to their well-being. These diagnoses would have been on-file with children's services. As I think about my current full-time job as an emergency room clinician, I am even more convinced that my psychology education would not have been enough. I regularly assess people who are intoxicated on methamphetamines, conduct lethality assessments, and psychiatrically hospitalize people. If I make a poor decision, someone could be inappropriately released and do serious harm to themselves- harm that could be fatal. I would be far less confident in my decision-making without the specific knowledge that I have from my social work education and internship.

The health and well-being of the people that we work with could be seriously jeopardized if Senator Antonio's amendment is not adopted. While I certainly appreciate that there is a worker shortage, this is a very dangerous way to address it. I wholeheartedly agree that we need more people in the field, but we need more qualified social workers with specific education. My patients and clients will always be my top priority. I am writing this to protect them. Our profession is critical for those in need and our integrity must be protected. Please vote in favor of Senator Antonio's amendment to remove the related-degree language.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I truly appreciate your consideration.

Best wishes,

MacKenzie Babics (License #: S. 2207724)