

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: 11/13/23

Name: Eric A. Braun

Are you representing: Yourself Organization

Organization (If Applicable): Shawnee State University

Position/Title: Interim President

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Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes No

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB94 / SB60

Specific Issue: Creation of Certified Mental Health Assistants

Are you testifying as a: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes No

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

How much time will your testimony require? Written Testimony Only

Please provide a brief statement on your position: Shawnee State University is committed to helping our region find immediate innovative solutions to the behavioral health crisis in Appalachian Ohio. Our communities are among those at highest risk and highest vulnerability. The creation of Certified Mental Health Assistants will help to expand our mental and behavioral health workforce and add to the continuum of care for those in need. It also provides an in-demand career pathway for students in any undergraduate program, particularly those in related fields.



Before the House Health Provider Services Committee

Representative Al Cutrona, Chair

**Testimony of
Eric A. Braun
Interim President
Shawnee State University**

November 13, 2023

Chair Cutrona, Vice Chair Gross, Ranking Member Somani, and Members of the Health Provider Services Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my personal and professional support for House Bill 97 for the creation of Certified Mental Health Assistants in the state of Ohio.

I serve Ohio as the Interim President of Shawnee State University (SSU). Like all of Ohio and the nation, we are in the middle of a behavioral health workforce crisis, where the growing mental and behavioral health needs of our citizens is much greater than our ability to provide care. Appalachian Ohio is a region of the state with the greatest need. Shawnee State University's primary service region consists of the five most economically and health distressed counties in Ohio: Scioto, Adams, Pike, Lawrence, and Jackson. This region has been labeled "the epicenter of the opioid crisis" and suffers from a significant gap in the pipeline of trained, licensed behavioral and mental health professionals in the regional recovery and substance abuse disorder ecosystem. The gap is widening exponentially due to the increased need for qualified behavioral health workers outside of addiction recovery, in K-12 school counseling, mental health agencies, and regional medical centers.

Our region is an Ohio Health Improvement Zone with the highest Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) band score based on its socioeconomic status. All of the counties in Shawnee State's service area have high poverty, high unemployment, low family income levels, and low education attainment. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the factors that contribute to high Social Vulnerability also create vulnerability to those in recovery and those at-risk for substance abuse.

Appalachian Ohio has demonstrated behavioral health needs and a shortage of providers. According to Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) data on areas with shortage designations for mental health providers, the southern Ohio region has the second highest Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) score, demonstrating the need for mental health providers. We need immediate and innovative solutions to build a strong workforce at every level in the continuum of care in Appalachian Ohio, from entry level to independent practitioners.

Shawnee State University is committed to being an active partner with mental health providers, K-12 schools, and substance abuse treatment agencies to develop, promote, and support a sustainable behavioral health workforce pipeline that includes a full continuum of stackable credentials, internships, practical experiences, degrees, and professional development. We believe that the creation of Certified Mental Health Assistants (CMHA) is part of the solution, as it will provide training for someone with a Bachelor's Degree to provide critical clinical counseling services in two years. CMHAs will work under the supervision of physicians, extending their capacity and making mental health services more accessible.

I appreciate your consideration of HB97 and your continued support in helping our communities rapidly increase the number of credentialed and licensed professionals providing mental health services in southern Ohio.