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Tuesday March 13, 2023

The Honorable Jerry Cirino, Chair  
Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Ohio Senate Building  
1 Capitol Square  
Ground Floor  
Columbus, OH 43215

The Honorable Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking member Ingram, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 60. My name is Annabel Meleán, and I have the pleasure of serving you as the Public Policy Officer of the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission. On behalf of OCHLA's Board of Commissioners and 500,000 Hispanic Ohioans, we ask for your support to establish licensed certified mental health assistants.

The Latino population in Ohio currently comprises 4.0% of Ohio's total population, the vast majority of whom were born in the United States. We live in all 88 counties. Our median age is 26.9 years old, and we represent one of Ohio's fastest growing workforce population segments. There are over 120,422 Hispanic students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, and Ohio is home to 20,000 Latinos who have proudly served in our nation's Armed Forces.

Our commission was established in 1977 by Governor James Rhodes in order to advise the Executive Branch and General Assembly on issues impacting our Latino community. Our mandates are to connect our constituents to local, state, and federal resources, and to build partnerships with government and Latino serving organizations. OCHLA is governed by an 11-member board appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the legislature.

The Ohio Latino Affairs Commission (OCHLA), is devoted to improving access to mental health services for the Hispanic/Latino Community in Ohio, and we feel that Senate Bill 60's potential to combat the worsening shortage of mental health professionals would be impactful for Latinos and other ethnic minority communities.

Over the last few years, one of our strategic priorities has been focusing on increasing access to mental health services and improving services for Hispanic Ohioans. In collaboration with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, our Commission launched the Latino Mental Health Navigator Program. This program seeks to reduce disparities in availability, accessibility, and quality of behavioral healthcare services for members of the Hispanic-Latino community in Ohio. Since March of 2022, seven community mental health navigator projects in designated areas of the state have been working to identify and target structural barriers for Latinos, to promote engagement in mental healthcare through education, and to facilitate navigation of systems of care for clients. After serving over 16,000 constituents in the first 9 months of this program, we



have been able to connect 274 individuals to mental health service providers and we consider that quite a milestone. Our Latino Mental Health Navigator Program has reached 3,800 new clients among the population served with specific needs related to their mental health wellbeing. Through our work, we have confirmed that one of the greatest barriers that navigators have identified are the extremely limited mental health services in their local communities, especially for Spanish speakers and the uninsured. As you probably will hear throughout the testimonies on this bill, many clients face long wait lists, high costs, and there are few bilingual provider options, even for our Latino clients who have experienced the targeted support of mental health navigators in seeking services.

An alternative pathway for licensure such as the one proposed through Senate Bill 60 will increase the number of providers in Ohio, and thus, lessen one of the barriers that our Hispanic/Latino community faces to accessing mental health care. This bill also presents the opportunity to build pipelines for Latino and other ethnic minorities to pursue a career in this field which can increase the number of multicultural and multilingual talent serving the mental health needs of Ohioans. In other words, this additional route to licensure will hopefully also foster a new wave of mental health professionals who reflect the different cultural and language needs in Ohio.

Chair Cirino, and distinguished members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions committee members may have at this time.

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