

Written-Only Opponent Testimony for SB 1
Senate Higher Education Committee Hearing on February 11, 2025
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Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony. My name is Stephanie Ash (she/her) and I serve as the Region 3 (Cleveland area) Co-Director on the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Ohio Chapter Board. I am also member of the NASW Ohio Social Work Criminalization Task Force. I hold dual licensure in Ohio as both a social worker and attorney and write using my unique expertise in both professions to voice my strong opposition to SB 1.

I cannot stress enough how the passing of SB 1 will create critical shortages in the behavioral health workforce and devastate enrollment in Ohio colleges and universities. In Ohio, “social workers make up the largest portion of licensed [behavioral health] professionals at 31%” [1]. In addition to being the largest provider of behavioral health services in Ohio, we are also steadfast adherents to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. The NASW Code of Ethics is woven into the very fabric of our profession and is a critical guide for the ethical practice of social work.

One of our six values is “Competence” which means that “social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise” [2]. Another value is “Integrity” meaning that “social workers are continually aware of the profession’s mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them” [3]. These values were taught to me the first day of my MSW program and continue to guide my everyday practice as a licensed social worker.

If Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is banned in Ohio schools of social work, we cannot adequately prepare social work students to become competent and ethical professionals and meet the increasing behavioral health needs of Ohioans. There is already a shortage of mental health professionals in 68 of Ohio’s 88 counties (77%), meaning that the majority of Ohio’s counties are unable to meet the needs of their residents [4]. If social work students are not able to learn about the incredible diversity of our Ohio communities, they will not be able to provide the essential mental health services needed by the most vulnerable Ohioans.

How will social workers know how to competently assist Appalachian clients who may experience different barriers to accessing care than Ohioans from major metropolitan areas? How will social workers know how to accommodate Deaf individuals if they cannot learn about accessibility tools and best practices? How will social workers be able to meet the needs of our Ohio seniors if they are not able to study the unique challenges of aging and learn how to navigate those challenges? The answer to all these questions is that social workers will not be able to learn the critical skills necessary to competently practice in Ohio if SB 1 passes. As a result, **our communities will suffer.**

Even if the Committee mistakenly believes that competent and ethical social work practice can occur without studying DEI, there is another critical aspect of passing SB 1 that the Committee has not fully considered: all Ohio schools of social work will lose accreditation and programs will shut down. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredits quality social work programs “to ensure a well-educated social work profession equipped to promote health, well-being, and justice for all people in a diverse society” [5]. DEI is a critical component of the accreditation process and without it, CSWE will not endorse a program.

The passing of SB 1 will force Ohio schools of social work to lose their accreditation from CSWE. Social workers cannot be licensed in Ohio if they do not graduate from an accredited school of social work per the Ohio Administrative Code Rule 4757-19-01(B)(2) [6]. **If SB 1 passes, the State of Ohio will require social work students to leave Ohio to be licensed here.** Social work students will take their skill, talent, tuition dollars, and families to other states with accredited social work programs instead of remaining in Ohio. It is unreasonable to expect a social work student to return to a state hostile to the ethical practice of social work once they have left. This will further impede access to needed mental health services for all Ohioans.

Passing SB 1 will have a devastating impact on our existing behavioral health shortage and contribute to Ohio schools losing funding, enrollment, and the intellectual diversity SB 1 claims to value. Given the practical, ethical, and workforce ramifications, I urge you to vote “NO” on SB 1, or at the very least, amend the bill to exclude higher education programs whose accreditation will be negatively impacted by the DEI ban. Instead of harming needed behavioral health professionals, I urge you to provide more funding for mental health services, create enticements to keep and draw more behavioral health professionals to our State, and pass laws which protect ethical social work practice in Ohio.

References

[1] DataOhio. (2021, April 27). *Workforce supply and demand within Ohio’s behavioral health system*. <https://data.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/data/projects/03-mhas-workforce>

[2] National Association of Social Workers. (2022). *Code of ethics: Ethical principles*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

[3] National Association of Social Workers. (2022). *Code of ethics: Ethical principles*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

[4] Ohio Department of Health. (2022, November). *Ohio mental health, health professional shortage areas (HPSAs)*. <https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/4e6d331f-5fd6-43b1-b355-accd0a07f56d/MH+HPSA+Map+2021.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>

[5] Council on Social Work Education. (n.d). *Accreditation*. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/>

[6] Ohio Admin. Code 4757-19-01(B)(2) (2022). <https://cswmft.ohio.gov/get-licensed/social-workers/lsw+license+instructions>