

Testimony of Matthew Butler, MSSA, LISW-S, LICDC-CS
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina D. Roegner, Chair
February 9, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Matthew Butler, and I am the Program Director for the Bachelor of Social Work Program at Kent State University. I have been a social worker in the state of Ohio for many years, having specialized in mental health and addiction work for more than two decades. I have also taught at Case Western Reserve University and Youngstown State University. In addition, I operate a counseling private practice. I am submitting this testimony as a private citizen, not a representative of any of these institutions of higher learning. As a human being and a professional who has dedicated my life to helping Ohioans through some of their deepest and most intractable challenges, I am strongly opposed to Senate Bill 1.

It is my belief that Senate Bill 1 would have an enormously negative effect on the residents of this great state. We all know that Ohio has struggled through multiple major challenges over the past decade. From the opioid epidemic to our suicide epidemic and even the COVID-19 pandemic, our state has utilized the resources available to us in order to pursue new and innovative solutions that have helped our citizens survive and thrive. Senate Bill 1 would take a different path—one that would cause more pain and more difficulties for the average Ohioan, and I cannot in good conscience choose to sit by without registering my concerns about this law with your committee.

Social work is a broad profession. Social workers are employed in hundreds of different types of roles throughout our state, from mental health and addiction treatment to work with veterans or in hospital positions, child protection agencies, or in law enforcement. There are few sectors which do not include social workers. We have more than 25,000 licensed social workers in the state of Ohio. At this time, the field of social work in this country (and the state) is in dire need of new social workers to fill positions which have been vacated due to retirement, in addition to the increasing needs of multiple areas (such as those who do mental health or addiction counseling). Social workers are unified through our adherence to our Code of Ethics and through having received either a Bachelor of Social Work or Master of Social Work, along with professional licensure.

At this time, there are 40 academic programs in the state of Ohio which have received (or are actively pursuing) accreditation through the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Every one of these programs (including my own) are subject to the 2022 CSWE Education Policy and Accreditation Standards, which can be found at the following link:

<https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/policies-process/2022epas/>

Two of the CSWE Competencies in particular (Competency 2 and Competency 3) would be outlawed by Senate Bill 1. Competency 2, requires that social work programs focus on strategies to “Advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice”. Competency 3 requires that social work programs work to “Engage anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in practice”. CSWE requires that these specific elements be addressed throughout our curriculum and included in every individual social work course. In order to obtain (or maintain) accreditation, every program must adhere to these standards, which Senate Bill 1 would make nearly impossible.

Losing CSWE accreditation would mean that graduates from these 40 Ohio Colleges and Universities would no longer be eligible to pursue licensure to practice. This will, in turn, result in far fewer licensed social workers in the workforce in both this state and our neighboring states.

We already have such a dire need for individuals in the helping professions in the state of Ohio. Decreasing the flow of social workers would greatly impact Ohioans in poverty, Ohioans involved in the child welfare system, Ohioans who are veterans, Ohioans receiving healthcare (including mental and addiction treatment). Having fewer social workers would make our overall standard of living decrease throughout the state, in a disastrous cascade of falling dominoes. Rural communities such as my own will suffer much more, as is often the case with workforce issues.

I understand the argument that proponents of this bill have made regarding the importance of hearing alternate points of view within the classroom, as well as not making students feel as though they had no choice but to agree with their instructors in academic settings. Both of these are admirable goals. Truthfully, having taught in higher education for a decade, I have rarely encountered faculty who do not value curiosity and critical thinking skills in their students. It is my sincere belief that the vast majority of Ohio's educators do what they do because they wish to instill those critical thinking skills in others. I put a great deal of effort into making sure my students feel safe in expressing their values and views in all of my classes, and I know that the same is true of most educators.

The question is not whether we value alternate perspectives, but whether our elected officials are aware of just how much this legislation would harm the learning environment within our schools. Valuing diversity explicitly means valuing a conservative perspective side by side with valuing a liberal perspective. An emphasis on diversity does not mean harming anyone, it actually means the opposite. My students are all made aware that I strongly believe a social worker can be conservative-leaning or liberal-leaning and still do an excellent job of making a positive impact through this profession. Mandates on classroom content such as Senate Bill 1 espouses serve to shut down debate, not cause more debates to happen. My students regularly tell me that they value the fact that they are not graded according to whether they agree with me, but rather graded according to the depth of their reflection and their ability to learn about and live out the values and perspectives of the social work profession, as well as their focus on the Code of Ethics.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this extremely harmful bill. I strongly believe that Senate Bill 1 would hurt the students and faculty of Ohio's colleges and universities, but would have even more dangerous impacts on the average Ohioan. Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony. I would welcome any questions or concerns at (440)319-9056 or matt@asyouwishcounseling.com.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthew Butler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Matthew Butler, MSSA, LISW-S, LICDC-CS