

SB 258 – Proponent Testimony
Ohio House Health Committee
Dr. Kathleen Ashton, Health Psychologist Cleveland Clinic Breast Center
December 1, 2020

Chair Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the Ohio House Health Committee, thank you for allowing Cleveland Clinic to provide proponent testimony for Senate Bill 258, which would allow Ohio to enter the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact (PSYPACT).

My name is Dr. Kathleen Ashton, and I am a clinical psychologist with board certification in clinical health psychology. I received both my undergraduate and doctoral degrees in Ohio and am proud to consider myself a life-long Ohioan. I have been part of the medical staff at Cleveland Clinic for approaching 20 years now and am honored to be here today on behalf of Cleveland Clinic.

As you may know, Cleveland Clinic is a nonprofit, multi-specialty academic medical center that integrates clinical and hospital care with research and education with the vast majority of our care provided in northeast Ohio. Cleveland Clinic is dedicated to being a leader in patient experience, clinical outcomes, research, and education for patients. Cleveland Clinic has a very long tradition of considering each patient's unique needs.

Psychologists within Cleveland Clinic are embedded within many institutes and departments, covering patients of all ages. We work closely with behavioral and mental health providers and with physicians, nurses and many other health professionals, in primary care as well as a multitude of specialized team services. We provide psychotherapy and psychological assessments; psychologists are also integral providers in areas such as oncology, transplant services, smoking cessation and weight management programs, and care for patients with chronic or terminal illnesses. These are just a few of the areas that psychologists in healthcare settings work to improve overall functioning and quality of life for our patients, families, and communities.

But as you know, it is not always easy to create the pathway that can link a patient with the appropriate provider. That is why we ask you today to support SB 258, for Ohio to join the other states that have already passed similar PSYPACT legislation.

Approved in February 2019, the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact (PSYPACT) has been created to facilitate telehealth and temporary in-person, face-to-face practice of psychology across jurisdictional boundaries. PSYPACT, as an interstate compact, is an agreement between states to enact legislation and enter into a contract for a specific, limited purpose or address a particular policy issue. Initially proposed to address the new challenges that have arisen in our “digital” and “virtual” times, this legislation was created to simplify the process of allowing appropriately trained and licensed psychologists to provide care for their own patients at times

when those patients happen to be outside of their home state. To date, 13 states have already passed legislation joining the compact and many others are in the process of considering this legislation (17 at the time of this testimony), aiming to allow the best patient care while continuing to provide the necessary regulatory protections through the state boards.

PSYPACT has only become increasingly important with the advent of COVID-19. Most psychologists have shifted the majority of their practice to telehealth to continue to serve patients safely, and patients are increasingly comfortable with and seeing the advantages of telepsychology services. Although some temporary emergency exceptions have been put in place during the pandemic, these are expiring and both patients and psychologists see value in continuing telepsychology services, at times with patients from other states.

SB 258 is not about the changing the requirements for psychological practice or in any way altering the protections that exist for the public as regulated through the Board of Psychology.

SB258 is about allowing already licensed psychologists to provide better care of their patients. Others have shared stories about the benefits to patients of having the ability to obtain treatment from their providers while they are out of state. Cleveland Clinic patients would similarly see a benefit if Ohio joins this compact.

For example, this legislation would mean that I could provide psychological support to my breast cancer patients from Pennsylvania that would normally travel an hour to Ohio for care but are limiting travel due to the current pandemic. This bill would allow me to provide long-distance care to my cancer patients when they travel out of state, for example, a patient who had to travel to another state to care for a dying parent. It would allow me to provide crisis care to Cleveland Clinic patients who were not able to find access to local care in the rural area of their state. There are often times when a patient's health is fragile and when continuity of care can be crucial. In particular, there are very few psychologists who provide specialty care for breast cancer patients nationally and patients are very grateful to be able to access this expertise through telehealth.

The passage of SB 258 will allow us to better serve our patients, whether they be traveling, or unable to come to Ohio for their routine care. Allowing us to see these patients via telehealth will ensure we can meet the patient where they are, when they need us. The general scope of this bill is narrow, while the impact that it can have on individual lives may be expansive.

We thank the sponsor Senator Gavarone for introducing this bill, and we thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions and commit to making myself available to members of this committee at any future time should I be able to be of assistance.