



Chairman Hackett, Vice Chair Hottinger, Ranking Member Craig and all members of the Senate Insurance and Financial Institutions Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony regarding Senate Bill 254 on behalf of the Ohio Counseling Association (OCA). OCA is the professional association representing licensed professional clinical counselors, licensed professional counselors, and counselor educators throughout Ohio.

The Ohio Counseling Association has been pleased to be an active participant in the Parity @10 Coalition. This bill is a culmination of deliberative and thoughtful work by the Coalition. The changes proposed in this legislation are common sense. In many cases, the provisions of the bill are simply aligning Ohio's law to the federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 that was passed after Ohio passed its state parity law. These changes may seem technical, but it is an important and meaningful step for Ohio to harmonize its Revised Code with the federal law. The bill also includes important provisions that ensure health insurance plans are complying with parity.

Mental health parity coverage is critical because having access to mental health benefits is a serious HEALTH issue. Treating mental healthcare in a manner that is in any way different from physical health is discriminatory to the patients who need the treatment. Often individuals with biologically based mental health conditions that are either primary in origin or a result of other conditions (e.g., people with anxiety and/or depression) have a higher incidence of other health-related issues, such as hypertension, obesity and addiction. Early treatment of mental health issues can serve as a preventative measure to ward off these successive disorders, resulting in ultimately lower costs for the patient and insurance company. But if Ohioans don't have meaningful and equitable coverage of their mental health and substance abuse illnesses, they are less likely to receive that critical preventative and protective care.

In addition, there is a growing awareness of the benefit of providing patients with multi-disciplinary healthcare teams, those in which medical professionals, counselors, social workers, etc., are all collaborating to provide holistic care for their patient. This leads to a better outcome for the consumer and for the community, as it results in that person maintaining optimum functionality and wellbeing. Professional counselors are highly valued in this team-focused approach, and thus should be reimbursed and have their services covered by insurers at a level consistent with their equal participation in the work of providing care.

We thank the sponsors of the bill for bringing this issue to the forefront of your legislative deliberations. It is critical that Ohio make mental health parity a priority for the state. Access to care is fundamental in recovery. This bill will assist and empower Ohioans to get the equitable mental healthcare access they need and deserve.

Members of the committee, we thank you for considering the perspective of the Ohio Counseling Association. We hope you will favorably report Senate Bill 253 to provide Ohioans greater access to mental health services.