



WORKFORCE AND
HIGHER EDUCATION
COMMITTEE

Witness Form

Today's Date 11/13/23

Name: Eric A. Braun, JD, Interim President of Shawnee State University

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Organization Representing: Shawnee State University

Testifying on Bill Number: SB60

Testimony: Verbal Written Both

Testifying As: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Are you a Registered Lobbyist? Yes No

Special Requests: _____



Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

**Testimony of
Eric A. Braun
Interim President
Shawnee State University**

November 13, 2023

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my personal and professional support for Senate Bill 60 for the creation of Certified Mental Health Assistants in the state of Ohio.

I serve Ohio as the Interim President of Shawnee State University (SSU). Like all of Ohio and the nation, we are in the middle of a behavioral health workforce crisis, where the growing mental and behavioral health needs of our citizens is much greater than our ability to provide care. Appalachian Ohio is a region of the state with the greatest need. Shawnee State University's primary service region consists of the five most economically and health distressed counties in Ohio: Scioto, Adams, Pike, Lawrence, and Jackson. This region has been labeled "the epicenter of the opioid crisis" and suffers from a significant gap in the pipeline of trained, licensed behavioral and mental health professionals in the regional recovery and substance abuse disorder ecosystem. The gap is widening exponentially due to the increased need for qualified behavioral health workers outside of addiction recovery, in K-12 school counseling, mental health agencies, and regional medical centers.

Our region is an Ohio Health Improvement Zone with the highest Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) band score based on its socioeconomic status. All of the counties in Shawnee State's service area have high poverty, high unemployment, low family income levels, and low education attainment. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the factors that contribute to high Social Vulnerability also create vulnerability to those in recovery and those at-risk for substance abuse.

Appalachian Ohio has demonstrated behavioral health needs and a shortage of providers. According to Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) data on areas with shortage designations for mental health providers, the southern Ohio region has the second highest Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) score, demonstrating the need for mental health providers. We need immediate and innovative solutions to build a strong workforce at every level in the continuum of care in Appalachian Ohio, from entry level to independent practitioners.

Shawnee State University is committed to being an active partner with mental health providers, K-12 schools, and substance abuse treatment agencies to develop, promote, and support a sustainable behavioral health workforce pipeline that includes a full continuum of stackable credentials, internships, practical experiences, degrees, and professional development. We believe that the creation of Certified Mental Health Assistants (CMHA) is part of the solution, as it will provide training for someone with a Bachelor's Degree to provide critical clinical counseling services in two years. CMHAs will work under the supervision of physicians, extending their capacity and making mental health services more accessible.

I appreciate your consideration of SB60 and your continued support in helping our communities rapidly increase the number of credentialed and licensed professionals providing mental health services in southern Ohio.