

Testimony for the House Children and Youth Committee

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Good morning,

I would like to thank Chairwoman Watson, Chairman Conklin and Mr. Grasa for their continued commitment to finding solutions to the complex issues of Pennsylvania's child welfare system. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony this morning in effort to better protect the children of this Commonwealth.

My name is Tara Breitsprecher, and I serve as the Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy for the National Association of Social Workers, Pennsylvania Chapter (NASW-PA). On behalf of the estimated 50,000 degreed social workers practicing in Pennsylvania, it is my pleasure to present testimony to this committee today. My perspective comes from the professional workforce; the committed individuals who encounter situations every day that most people would prefer to pretend are nonexistent in our communities.

During the April committee hearing, the committee heard testimony explaining the diverse knowledge a child welfare worker needs in order to fulfill the job requirements. A few examples include child development, mental health, human anatomy, family intervention, group facilitation, and documentation.

The effective delivery of child welfare services is a complicated endeavor. Determining a child's physical safety, ensuring his/her wellbeing, determining the tools necessary to strengthen a family, and doing all of this with little ability to improve the quality of housing, education or employment available to that child and family is an overwhelming challenge. Yet, appropriately intervening in the lives of children not only means the difference between life and death, the success of government's intervention also profoundly impacts the quality of that child's life.

NASW-PA has long advocated for an increase in job requirements for Pennsylvania's child welfare workers. Even the strongest laws and regulations based on best-practice and sound research cannot fully protect Pennsylvania's children. People protect children. Appropriately educated, trained, and licensed individuals working in ethical environments that hold employees accountable, is how we effectively protect children. It will come as no surprise that as a professional social worker and representative of the 50,000 other social workers in this Commonwealth, I strongly believe that we need to re-evaluate the requirements to be hired as a child welfare worker.

The educational requirement for a child welfare worker through the civil service exam is only twelve credits in social science. Almost every graduate from a liberal arts program has

completed twelve credits in social science. This means that an individual with an art degree and no practice experience with children may still meet the requirements for a child welfare position.

As the committee learned through testimony in the last hearing, not all counties utilize the state civil service exam, and some counties have a slightly higher standard than the twelve credits in social science, and require a college degree. But regardless of these differences, there is no requirement that a caseworker have a degree in a social science field such as social work, sociology, human services or psychology.

While all of these degrees do not equally prepare you for child welfare, they are at least all grounded in working with people. **NASW-PA would like to see the legislature create the minimal standard of a social science bachelor degree to receive state funding to provide any reimbursable services to children and families within the child welfare system.**

Beyond needing a minimum requirement of a bachelor degree in a social science to be hired as a child welfare worker, we need more social workers in the child welfare system. While there are efforts to encourage social workers to pursue a child welfare position, we need to increase recruitment and incentivize positions for social workers in the public and private sector. When it comes to the delivery of front-line human services, a bachelor's degree in social work is the degree that is most specifically tailored to effectively train individuals to perform the work at hand.

It was mentioned several times during the last hearing that a caseworker needs the appropriate knowledge base as well as field experience to truly be prepared for a child welfare position. A bachelor-level social worker graduates with both the educational background as well as more than 600 hours of supervised field experience. In addition, individuals who hold their BSW now have the option to pursue their LBSW, a new license under the State Board of Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists and Professional Counselors. Each committee member who was present to vote on SB 807 of 2014 (now Act 179 of 2014), Licensure for Bachelor-Level Social Workers, voted in favor.

If you have your nails painted at the mall or go to the barber for a haircut, the individual providing that service is required to be licensed. But yet those working with the most vulnerable and dependent among us are not required to hold any license. This means that child welfare workers are not required to pass a basic competency exam, have an appropriate educational degree or follow a code of ethics. NASW-PA understands that creating a child welfare worker license at this point is not likely. However, **the LBSW was specifically created to ensure the professional, ethical and competent practice of our front-line human service providers, and we hope to see this license utilized and incentivized to increase workforce standards.**

Lastly, I would like to ask the legislature and all in attendance to be cognizant of social work title protection. Under Act 68 of 2008, it is illegal for an individual to hold oneself out as a social worker, use the title "social worker," or use the abbreviation "SW" unless they hold a current license (LBSW, LSW or LCSW) or have received a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree from a

CSWE accredited school or program of social work. Working with children and families does not make one a social worker. A social work license or a degree from an accredited social work program makes you a social worker.

I am the individual who receives the calls and emails from social workers and consumers of social work services notifying me of someone who refers to himself/herself as a social worker when he/she is in fact not a social worker. Nearly every time there is a tragedy involving Children and Youth, the caseworker is referred to as a social worker. After inquiring about the professional background of the caseworker, I have found that more than 80% of the high profile reports in the past two years have involved caseworkers without a social work background.

I receive more complaints about title protection violations from children and youth agencies, public and private, than any other practice setting. I receive and respond to nearly one report per week. It is essential that caseworkers are honest about their professional backgrounds with their coworkers and clients. **Please help us protect the integrity of the profession and encourage social workers in the child welfare field by acknowledging their specialized skills and respecting the professional social work title that they have earned.**

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Pennsylvania's social workers. We look forward to continued collaboration with the committee.