

Testimony for the House Professional Licensure Committee  
On House Bill 2353  
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University of Pittsburgh

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Good morning to the members of the House Professional Licensure Committee, staff and those in attendance for this informative hearing. I am Dr. Pamela Richmond, and I teach full-time in the Social Work Program at Mansfield University. Mansfield is located in the North Central Region of the state in a rural community. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you this morning regarding the benefits of a social service license on rural human services. However, prior to talking about the present and my students, I would like to briefly refer to my background in social services to demonstrate why the license is important.

Twenty years ago, I began working at a residential treatment facility for adolescent girls with drug/alcohol difficulties, emotional and behavioral problems. When I was hired I had an associate's degree with no previous experience working with teens. In fact, I had worked for several years with younger children. What I brought to the position was an eagerness to learn from a new experience, kindness, and the desire to help others. Unfortunately, I lacked the education, knowledge, skills, and experience for the job. I was told I was hired because "we liked your energy and we thought we could mold you". Without a doubt, I was naive and all of my knowledge and skills regarding working in such a vulnerable setting was learned "on the job" and took several years to master. I also discovered I was hired because the administration was "desperate" and licensing personnel were visiting the agency and they needed to have all of the "front-line" positions filled. It was years after I began working in the residential treatment program that I decided to return to school to finish my bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in social work.

It is from my knowledge of living/working in several states and having the opportunity to supervise social service workers that I can attest that not a lot has changed in the twenty years since I was an inexperienced helping professional. Typically, there is a lot of turn-over with "front-line workers"--agencies are looking to have a position filled "yesterday" and may not hire the most qualified person for the job. Rather, an individual that presents as caring and available typically wins the invitation of a job offer. Experience tells me that this is not always what is in the best interest of clients.

I would like to share with you how licensure will benefit undergraduate social work students living in the rural areas of Pennsylvania. The majority of the students in the Social Work Program at Mansfield University are first generation college students having always lived in the area. For the vast majority, they are not interested in continuing their education beyond their bachelor's degree and they have no plans to move from the area. There is no accredited state-operated MSW program in my rural part of the state. Quite simply, their purpose of obtaining the bachelor's degree in social work is to better position themselves to compete for human service jobs with individuals that do not have a degree in a human service related field nor the in-depth course work and practical experience they are provided in their undergraduate education.

For example, students graduating from any social work program that has been accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (Mansfield University is accredited) has to have coursework addressing families, groups, organizations, communities, diversity, human behavior, and ethics. In addition, all students prior to graduation must complete 500 hours of field work where the student is placed in an agency working under the supervision of a social worker where they can apply the knowledge and skills that they have learned in the classroom. The rigor of the coursework and field work is to ensure that students have the necessary training when they enter the work force so clients are assisted in the best way possible.

My colleague, Jenna Mehnert, has aptly expressed that "licensure raises the bar" due to the required education needed and the "checks and balances" of demonstrating knowledge by passing a rigorous exam prior to working with our most vulnerable members of society (for example, children and teens, elderly, and the mentally ill). Additionally, licensure will also serve to protect the public from those that have no professional training. In rural areas where services are limited, individuals deserve the right to know that their assistance is coming from the most qualified professional. On behalf of social work students at Mansfield University, they would welcome the opportunity to take a licensure exam upon graduation to demonstrate that they are well equipped to enter the work force and assist clients. Unlike their professor, they will start off working in the social services arena, from a position of strength; they do not have to learn basic skills "on the job". Therefore, I respectfully request your support for bachelor level human services license because it will better serve all residents of the state of PA, including rural residents.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you this morning.