

Testimony for the House Professional Licensure Committee

On House Bill 2353

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Drexel University

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Mr. Chairman, good morning to you and to the rest of the members of the House Professional Licensure Committee. I am Dr. John Vafeas and I am the chair and professor in the Department of Social Work at Kutztown University. I am currently also the Director of the Master of Social Work Program. This is the end of my nineteenth year as a faculty member at Kutztown. In my teaching load I have instructed both Baccalaureate and Master level classes, I have been in the leadership team for the accreditation and re-affirmation of the BSW and the MSW programs, and over the years I have been involved with the field training and internship component of our programs. Prior to coming to Kutztown University, I had teaching experiences at the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and Ryder University's Master of Human Services Program. My practice experience of ten years prior to entering academic life ranged from counseling people with developmental and other disabilities to vocational rehabilitation, and from welfare to juvenile justice. My testimony here is also informed by my experience serving on a number of boards of directors, most recently that of a major, multi-county mental health/mental retardation provider. I am here today with my colleague and Professor of social work Dr. Janice Gasker who is also the program director in our Baccalaureate program. Our testimony will be composed of two segments to address two major issues that we believe your committee should consider.

The first, which I will present, is related to the need for licensing adequately prepared baccalaureate level professionals for the field of human services. The second,

presented by Dr. Gasker, will touch on considerations which will make such a license an accurate portrayal of practitioners' abilities.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

From my perspective, licensure is a critical issue for three reasons. First, many consumers of human services are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Their protection is most important to the citizens of the commonwealth. Second, employers in human services are faced with situations fraught with uncertainty about the reliability and credibility of their new workers. Finally, staff shortages related to the low social value placed on human service workers threaten the well-being and survival of both consumers and agencies alike.

Related to the protection of the public, licensed individuals meet standardized minimal criteria. The licensure process creates assurances that minimum levels of competency may be expected from all service providers. The continuing education so critical to keeping up with changes in the cultural and demographic profile of clientele is also assured, as is a worker's understanding of the changing nature of social ills and the methods of addressing them. Licensure typically also requires personal references, an additional warranty of a person's stability and character.

Related to the concerns of employers, licensed individuals bring a level of assurance of competence. Employers in human services experience a severe turnover of staff which current research attributes to lack of appropriate training. This turnover drains the already limited budgets of governmental and not-for-profit organizations. Without even considering the havoc this turnover wrecks on client service and staff-client relationships, it discourages potentially effective persons from joining the ranks of helping professionals.

Finally, recruitment and retention of potentially effective personnel is a serious consideration. Licensing will elevate the stature of human service workers and will make it a more attractive career option for individuals who are concerned for the well-being of others.

When I first came to Kutztown, one of my assignments was to develop internship and employment opportunities for students. Our curricular design at that time perfectly paralleled that of the rest of the human service and social science disciplines in that we were unaccredited, our courses were taken in most any sequence and our internship was unstructured and optional. At that time, I learned that the public child welfare agencies were in crisis. They faced untenable staff turnover rates, burnout and difficulty identifying quality workers. In spite of these challenges, they refused to train interns. I learned that this refusal was due to the uneven preparation of student from a variety of disciplines. Concurrently, we were working to accredit our program. The rigors of that standardization process resulted in an increase in the quality and relevance of student training. Internships became structured and required. Working together with a county administrator, we soon structured a program in which our students engaged in appropriate coursework and agency-based practicum experiences. These students soon found themselves on the payroll in permanent positions following graduation. Since then, we have trained over 100 child welfare professionals for three counties. The retention rate is so good that when I visit the agencies I am surrounded by the friendly, familiar faces of alumni. This illustrates the significance of standardization in training for staff recruitment and worker job satisfaction. Administrators report that the continuity of services to clients is both efficient and cost effective. This situation parallels what licensing is attempting to accomplish. The trust in competency that licensing provides was established. Faculty recommendation regarding character and competency served as the assurance provided by the recommendations that are part of licensing. Students were prepared for the workplace and their performance is predictable. Their training leaves them with the feeling of competence that results in job satisfaction. They enjoy their work and they stay.

While human service licensure is important, an accredited social work degree deserves separate designation in this licensure process. My colleague will speak to the nature of baccalaureate social work education, which will provide the rationale for this thinking.

Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak. I hold the baccalaureate, Master's and doctoral degree in social work. I am currently the director of the baccalaureate social work program at Kutztown University, and my teaching assignment includes courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I, too, have been involved in the leadership team charged with the responsibility for the accreditation and re-affirmation of both of these programs. I have practiced as a paraprofessional, a BSW, an MSW and a DSW. In my current position, I advise candidates for the baccalaureate degree, including those who are transferring from community colleges and struggle to meet our program's rigorous standards. I also am a consultant to human service provider agencies and am aware of the challenges faced by employers in this field.

I know you have heard testimony here and in other settings about the importance of licensure for baccalaureate level helping professionals. Of primary importance, of course, is consumer protection. Related to that is an issue that you must consider if such licensure is to achieve its ends. Consumer protection is only possible if a license is a clear reflection of the license-holder's qualifications, and in this case qualifications differ widely by type of preparation.

At the baccalaureate level, human services are provided by graduates from a number of disciplines, including psychology, human development and sociology. Each provides a different viewpoint, and with experience, each may learn to carry out their duties with competence. To establish a standard set of competencies and to license these practitioners would be a service to consumers as well as employers. However, if the license is to accurately reflect the services that can be provided by the license holder, then a different designation must be made for social work practitioners. Social work practitioners conduct their work in a manner that is from the day of their graduation qualitatively different than that of their generic human service peers. This difference is the result of several factors:

1. Social work degrees are granted only by programs that are accredited by a national body, the Council on Social Work Education. This accreditation creates the following distinctions for all social work students:
  - a. Their education meets national standards and is periodically evaluated for compliance specific to its ability to produce graduates with consistent abilities
  - b. Their educational experience is always based on a liberal arts and sciences foundation with emphasis on critical thinking and an understanding of human behavior from a biological, social and psychological perspective
  - c. They complete a curriculum based on three pillars: profession-specific theoretical knowledge, evidence-based practice skills and a professional Code of Ethics
  - d. They are guaranteed instructors with at least 2 years of supervised, post terminal degree practice experience
  - e. They experience an instructor-student ratio that allows for professional advising and mentoring
  - f. They participate in an intensive, structured internship with pre-approved host agencies and program-trained field supervisors
2. Social work programs recognize that work and life experience are not substitutes for training; work and life experiences provide professional growth only under structured educational conditions. Consequently, social work skills cannot be acquired simply through work experience.
3. Social work graduates demonstrate proficiency in 10 areas of competency, including the ability to:
  - a. Use their generalist preparation to be flexible and knowledgeable in working with diverse and marginalized populations with far-ranging problems

- b. **Assess and respond uniformly to clients' multi-faceted problems via changes in the individual, the family and social programs using a broad range of skills,**
- c. **Employ supervision to evaluate and improve practice,**
- d. **Use critical thinking in decision-making and the provision of evidence-based practice,**
- e. **Empirically evaluate the success of their efforts**
- f. **Adhere to their professional code of ethics, and**
- g. **Commit to life-long professional growth and development.**

In sum, the social work graduate brings a set of skills that are qualitatively different. It is a distinction that not only clients but employers have a right to know. A lesson may be learned from the experiences of other states. According to the Association of Social Work Boards, at least 30 states currently license baccalaureate level social workers. Of those 30, only about six include graduates of other disciplines in the baccalaureate level qualification. Of interest to Pennsylvania may be the experiences of Michigan, New Mexico and others where all-inclusive human service licensure has resulted in so many problems that the policies had to be re-written to differentiate the qualifications of baccalaureate social work from others. We hope to respond to the needs of consumers, employers and the community with a baccalaureate license for human service professionals and a different designation for baccalaureate social work professionals. We are in support of the proposed qualifications for a Licensed Human Service Professional, we simply recommend that there also be a Licensed Baccalaureate Social Worker designation with the qualifications of the BSW and an examination. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.