

HOUSE PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE COMMITTEE  
INFORMATIONAL MEETING ON HOUSE BILL 1356  
AUGUST 8, 2023  
TESTIMONY: Noah Potvin, PhD, LPC, MT-BC

Good morning Chair Burns, Chair Metzgar, and members of the House Professional Licensure committee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the importance of music therapy licensure. For over 16 years as both a board-certified music therapist and a licensed professional counselor, I have worked in a variety of hospice and palliative care settings and currently maintain a private practice working with individuals with chronic illness. I would like to open my statements with two vignettes.

When working for hospice, I was leading a group session with new patients in a long-term care facility. It was early in my career, and I made an assumption that the song "Almost Like Being In Love" would be a safe song, one that romanticized the value of love using positive lyrics and uplifting music. Midway through the first chorus, however, I observed a woman – I will call her Betty - in a wheelchair begin to have a reaction. Her body stiffened, her breathing became more rapid, and her affect became constricted – as I finished the chorus, these symptoms intensified and she now began to move around her wheelchair in an agitated manner. I made the clinical decision to transition out of that song and move into a new one, and the patient almost immediately began to visibly relax. After the session, I checked in with her, and she shared how that song had been her wedding song, and how she experienced an intense grief response in session because her husband had died several months prior.

In another session with a patient with cerebral palsy and an intellectual disorder – I will call him Kevin - I sang "Summertime" from *Porgy & Bess* to provide reality orientation since he rarely was able to go outside. However, he quickly became agitated and lashed out at the guitar and began tearing at his hospital gown, and this patient who up to that point had typically only communicated with one word at a time began wailing "I want my momma." I realized that while I had intended this song to provide context about the season, he knew it as the lullaby that it was in the opera and was experiencing a great deal of pain reflecting on his loved one through that music experience. In that moment, I transitioned from "Summertime" to "Amazing Grace" to provide a spiritual comfort that rhythmically entrained with his breathing and melodically attuned to his facial affect.

Imagine, however, what would have happened for Betty if she had been forced to listen to "Almost Like Being In Love" over headphones and had been unable to verbally

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communicate what she was feeling. How might her distress have escalated to an agitation with the potential for injurious behavior? And for Calvin, imagine what would have happened if a music provider simply continued playing "Summertime" regardless of Calvin's distress. If he then received medication to reduce his agitation, how might cutting him off from this pain have continued to hinder his emotional health rather than helping him move through and process that pain?

I offer these stories to communicate music's potential for harm in clinical situations with individuals moving through acute and chronic health journeys. Music is frequently framed as a universally peaceful, enjoyable, and fun medium that elicits the best of us, and certainly music experiences can help people experience those affective states. However, because of music's capacity to elicit strong emotions, it has the capacity to open us to all emotions, including those that evoke anxiety, fear, and distress. In those moments, as I needed to with both those patients I described above, music therapists draw upon their skills as professional musicians and clinicians to assess the potential for harm and adjust the music interventions as needed to ensure a safe movement through these powerful experiences. At present, music therapists' only official training designation is a national board certification that helps ensure employers that music therapists retain certain skill sets and knowledge bases. Without licensure, however, service users in Pennsylvania are subject to untrained providers facilitating music experiences without the skill to assess for harm and make the necessary adjustments.

As a licensed professional counselor in addition to a board-certified music therapist, I am able to testify to the different skill sets between a counselor and a music therapist. In counseling, change and transformation in therapy occurs primarily through a verbal medium. In my particular counseling practice, we use verbal processing to become aware of stressful triggers, explore ways of defusing the irrational thoughts that can manifest in response to those triggers, and discuss strategies for sustaining healthy cognitive constructs and emotional responses in daily living. Nowhere in this process, however, is music a factor.

As a music therapist my practice similarly identifies stressors and explores strategies for managing the subsequent anxiety, but we do so through the medium of music rather than verbal. Diverse music experiences are facilitated using active listening, live recreations, spontaneous improvisations, and structured songwriting. While the goals and outcomes might share many similarities, the process by which a counselor and music therapist help individuals accomplish them are distinctly different, and thus call upon different clinical skills.

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In conclusion, I would underscore how licensure helps ensure that all the people who benefit from music therapy across the state of Pennsylvania – such as military veterans, children with developmental disorders, adults facing housing insecurity, older adults with dementia, families escaping domestic violence, and adults recovering from emotional, spiritual, and neurologic traumas – are receiving competent services from equally competent music therapists with the training and experience to not simply play music but to facilitate deep, meaningful healing music experiences.

To ensure the most vulnerable of us are receiving the best Pennsylvania has to offer, please support efforts to License Professional Music Therapists and place them under the State Board of Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists and Professional Counselors by voting "yes" on House Bill 1356

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