

February 21, 2011

To: The Senate Select Committee on Children
From: Andrew T. Nilsson, Ph.D., LCSW
Re: Senate Bill # 322, An Act Concerning the Qualifications of Department of Children and Families Employees

I am Coordinator of the undergraduate social work program at Eastern Connecticut State University. I am offering this statement to solicit your support for the originally proposed language of Senate Bill #322, An Act Concerning the Qualifications of Department of Children and Families Employees. My concern with the present language of the committee bill lies in its exclusion of bachelor's level social workers and its inclusion of persons with degrees in "a closely related field" as equivalent to persons with social work training.

As an educator of undergraduate social work students I feel I can speak most effectively about the BSW degree. In the past when Eastern was considering beginning a BSW program, I completed a study of the educational preparation of undergraduate psychology, sociology, human service, and social work majors in Connecticut. By far social work majors receive the best preparation for human service practice. Where psychology and sociology programs teach students about their discipline, social work programs teach practice skills. In effect, social work programs are roughly equivalent to teacher education – we teach our students how to be social workers, the skills needed for social work practice. BSW education, for example, includes a minimum of 400 supervised hours on the job, the social work equivalent to practice teaching in teacher training. None of the other disciplines I studied provided such complete preparation for human service work.

BSW graduates are social work professionals. Thirty-six states plus the District of Columbia license or offer professional certification for BSW social workers. Although Connecticut does not license social workers at the BSW level, graduates of Eastern's social work program have gone on to become DCF employees and at least one is now a DCF supervisor. I fully support true professionalization of DCF social workers as envisioned by Senate Bill #322 but would hate to see the value of BSW social workers ignored as a qualification for DCF employment.

As originally drafted, Senate Bill #322 will insure that new DCF employees begin with a strong professional foundation appropriate for the demanding task of child protection. Today few DCF "social workers" hold social work degrees. I suspect that this is one reason why DCF is such a chronic source of concern for our state. Providing children with well-prepared workers will not cost the state more money. DCF salaries are high, exceeding most social work salaries in the private sector. And DCF should be able to fill its positions with qualified workers. Connecticut has two MSW and six BSW programs producing approximately 300 MSW and 200 BSW students annually. I encourage you to support Senate Bill #322 to require social work education for DCF caseworkers and to improve state services for our most vulnerable children.

If I can speak with you further about SB #322, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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