



Cancer Institute

SB 857

Testimony of

[Karen Weingrod, Hartford Healthcare Cancer Institute]

In support of

SB 857- AN ACT CONCERNING LICENSURE FOR GENETIC COUNSELORS

February 20, 2015

Dear Senator Gerratana, Representative Ritter, Senator Markley, Representative Srinivasan and members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Karen Weingrod and I serve as manager for the genetics, breast and gynecologic oncology programs for the Hartford HealthCare Cancer Institute. I am submitting testimony on behalf of Hartford HealthCare in support of SB 857, An Act Concerning Licensure for Genetic Counselors, along with the proposed language substitutions submitted by the genetic counselors related to this bill.

The Hartford HealthCare Cancer Institute, which includes the cancer programs at Hartford Hospital, the Hospital of Central Connecticut, MidState Medical Center, Backus Hospital and Windham Hospital, recognizes the increasing importance of assessing genetic risk factors in the treatment and prevention of cancer. Genetic testing related to breast and ovarian cancer, colon cancer and endometrial cancer, to name several common cancers that have an identifiable genetic component, has become a standard of cancer care.

We have seen tremendous growth in the demand for our genetic counseling services at Hartford HealthCare, and we seek to provide a single standard of the highest quality care throughout our cancer institute. It is vital to us that our genetic counseling staff is current in their training and continuing education, in their understanding of genetic medicine and technology and in the implications of testing on patients and family members. Licensure is needed to ensure that the quality of genetic counseling professionals remains high and that the most expert level of care is provided.

Licensure will provide assurance to the healthcare providers who refer to us for genetic counseling and testing that their patients are receiving the best advice, the most appropriate testing and proper support throughout the process. Genetic counselors are professionals whose training includes a Master's Degree and mandatory continuing education; licensure would further add to their level of specialized training. It will alleviate the potential for harm caused by inadequately trained providers performing incomplete risk assessments, ordering incorrect tests, misinterpreting results or providing inappropriate guidance that may increase psychological stress and lead to unnecessary procedures.

The increased demand for genetic counseling and testing has resulted in waiting lists for services. Although patients are seen very quickly when the result of genetic testing will impact their cancer care,

less urgent situations may require a wait. Currently, there is no reimbursement for genetic counseling services; licensure will remove constraints on billing for genetic counseling and enable medical centers to hire more genetic counselors thereby improving access to care. Every indication is that the demand for genetic counseling will grow as more is learned about genetic predispositions to cancer.

For patients and families experiencing the stress of a possible hereditary cancer syndrome, the counseling skills, support and care provided by genetic counselors is very meaningful. Not only are they working with cancer patients, they are also providing care to family members who may have to face a significantly increased risk of a cancer diagnosis as the result of a genetic mutation. Genetic counselors are an important resource in helping patients and families to cope with fears of new diagnoses for themselves or loved ones, and genetic counselors empower and support these individuals as they make difficult decisions about their health care. Many national societies recommend that genetic testing for inherited cancer susceptibility be performed in the context of genetic counseling.

We believe that licensure for genetic counselors provides an important safeguard in providing cancer patients and their families with the highest quality professional services in this rapidly growing area of cancer care, as well as in other medical syndromes where genetics plays a key role.

Thank you for your time and interest in this issue.

Sincerely,

Karen Weingrod, MA
Cancer Program Manager
Hartford HealthCare Cancer Institute