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Testimony on HB 6780: An Act Requiring Certain Health Care Professionals to Complete Continuing Education Requirements Related to Mental Health Conditions Common to Veterans and Family Members of Veterans

Committee on Veterans Affairs  
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Submitted By: Stephen A. Karp, MSW

The National Association of Social Workers, CT Chapter representing nearly 3,000 members is in opposition to HB 6780. While we recognize the intent of the proposed bill we cannot support a mandated continuing education requirement that is as broadly designed as this bill calls for.

Clinical social workers are required to attain 15 hours of continuing education per license year with at least one hour of training on cultural competence. This leaves 14 hours of continuing education hours that the social worker must attain in areas that the professional social worker determines they are most in need of to continue their education in practice areas that they perform. This bill would reduce that number to 12 hours by requiring training specific to veterans and families of veterans. This reduction in the number of hours that a professional social worker has to select training that is directly pertinent to their practice is of great concern to us.

The premise of 6780 is that all of the professions listed in the bill need training specific to veteran's issues. The flaw in this approach is that it assumes that all of the licensed professionals listed in 6780 are practicing with veterans and families of veterans. In the case of social workers a significant portion of our profession does not treat or work with veterans and family members of veterans. For this group 6780 will be requiring two hours of training each year on matters that they do not encounter in their practice. Required continuing education hours are meant to expand the practitioners knowledge and skills in practice fields that the practitioner is directly involved in and it is best that it be kept that way.

The NASW Code of Ethics requires each social worker to be competent in the area(s) of practice they perform. It is up to the professional to assure that they are up to date in current theory, skills and knowledge of their practice fields. If a social worker is treating veterans and families of veterans it is the responsibility of the social worker to be fully trained and competent in the common issues facing veterans and their families. A continuing education requirement is not necessary as the professional social worker is already required under their Code of Ethics to maintain such skills. Likewise, a social worker who does not work with veterans and their families is required to maintain their skills in the fields in which they work. For the former this bill is not needed as the social worker is already so required and for the latter this bill sets in place a requirement for training that is not directly relevant to that social worker's practice.

We are also concerned that 6780 will set precedence for other specific interest groups to demand continuing education hours for their specific fields of interest. We fear that in the future there will be other required continuing education hours set in place to the point where the licensed professional will be boxed in without freedom of choice to attain continuing education hours on topics that the individual practitioner determines is most needed by them.

Finally we will note that there is no enforcement by the Department of Public Health of continuing education requirements except when a complaint is filed against a licensed practitioner. Thus any such legislation if passed into law is at best a feel good gesture that is unenforceable.

In the past few years schools of social work have added veteran's issues into the curriculum and some schools are now offering specializations in veteran's affairs. We see this as a positive trend that we expect will continue to expand throughout schools of social work. The field of social work is already acting to assure that we have a workforce ready to work with veterans.

NASW/CT recognizes the importance of working with veteran's and their families. We have offered workshops on this topic and will continue to do so. We have encouraged schools of social work to offer course content on veteran's and are encouraged that this is happening. We believe this approach is the most effective way to assure well trained social workers who can work with veterans and their families. Likewise we offer training on a wide range of other practice fields for those social workers who work in those areas. Continuing education is the most effective when it covers topics that are directly relevant to the practitioner's work. Unfortunately 6780 does not offer this successful approach and thus we ask that the bill be rejected.