

Public Health Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-7132

AN ACT CONCERNING LICENSURE OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

Title: ASSOCIATES AND MARITAL AND FAMILY THERAPIST ASSOCIATES.

Vote Date:

Vote Action:

PH Date: 2/25/2019

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Public Health Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

To require the licensure of professional counselor associates and marital and family therapist associates through the creation of a two-tier licensing structure.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Raul Pino, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of the Department of Public Health (DPH): The DPH is opposed to this legislation. The Department expressed concern with the language of the bill which appears to conflict with the intent of the bill because it requires a license while working toward a license. Also, the bill does not differentiate the scopes of practice between an associate and a fully licensed professional counselor and marital and family therapist. The Department also noted that it could not establish and regulate these new licensure categories within existing resources which may cause a potential negative fiscal impact to the Department.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Michael Shavel, Licensed Professional Counselor and President of the Connecticut Counseling Association (CCA): Mr. Shavel supports this bill because it would strengthen the identity of professional counselors at a time when there is an increased demand for mental health services. The bill would also provide job development, consumer protections and place professional counselors on equal footing with colleagues in other mental health professions. Mr. Shavel does not believe these important gains would place an additional burden on DPH as the additional tier of licensure would simply bring professional counselors

under the oversight of the Department at an earlier point in their careers. He points out that this legislation does not seek any change in the scope of practice for professional counselors. There is a need for change because the current licensing structure can create a “Catch-22” situation. The jobs needed to obtain the hours required for licensure are often limited to licensed professionals. Since 2015, social workers seeking to practice have been able to obtain a first-tier license which also allows them to practice while they accrue the 3000 hours needed to obtain a “second tier” license. This is a significant advantage over other mental health professions. *The CCA requests one significant change in the language of the bill. It respectfully requests that after an established date, the 3000 clinical hours required to achieve licensure as a Licensed Professional Counselor be completed as a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate.* This would make it a prerequisite to the second-tier licensure and would be similar to licensure structure for social workers.

Dr. Siobhan Evarts, Director, Clinical Counseling Program, Albertus Magnus College:

Dr. Evarts notes that counselors who have graduated from a 60-credit program with extensive supervised field experience are qualified to provide the much needed mental health and addiction counseling in our communities. Counselors are competing for jobs against social workers who are currently able to obtain a first-tier license which gives the social worker an advantage in the job pool. It is imperative that our state offers equal opportunity to all graduates from social work, mental health and addiction counseling, and family counseling programs to obtain first-tier licensure. She urges passage of the bill.

Dr. Stephen Hegedus, Dean of the School of Education: Currently in Connecticut, in spite of excellent and rigorous training, new counseling graduates cannot receive a license or certification under which they can practice. These new graduates are basically in limbo as they attempt to find opportunities to accrue the supervised hours needed to become licensed. Our state has many mental health treatment needs and we should be doing all we can to retain our highly trained counselors in Connecticut.

Jenna Ryan, Clinical Mental Health Counseling Graduate at Southern Connecticut State University: Currently, students struggle to find the very jobs that are required to obtain the 3000 clinical hours necessary to obtain licensure because these jobs are often limited to licensed professionals. Passing this legislation will provide opportunities for employment to many talented and skilled therapists. It will also level the playing field as recent graduates compete with other skilled professionals, such as social workers, who already have a first-tier licensure in place.

Katarina Serrano, Recent Graduate from Central Connecticut State University: Ms. Serrano shared a recent experience while trying to assist a client at a Veteran’s Administration (VA) Center. When Ms. Serrano mentioned that she was on track to become a licensed practical counselor, she was told that they could not assist her because the VA only recognizes and accommodates a student with a Bachelor of Arts or Master’s in Social Work. This legislation would provide, through first-tier licensure, an opportunity to seek employment commensurate with her training, through first-tier licensure.

An additional 43 pieces of testimony were submitted in support of this legislation stating the same reasons as expressed above.

Rebecca Ruitto, Chairman, Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, (AMFT):

The AMFT supports this legislation that would remove barriers currently affecting Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) graduates attempting to accumulate the 1000 clinical practice hours required to obtain licensure. Despite the clinical knowledge and training of graduates, MFTs in –training do not meet requirements for many posted and open positions. This lack of employment also negatively impacts patients who lose continuity of care. In Connecticut, there are 6 licensed mental health professions: Marriage and Family Therapists, Professional Counselors, Social Workers, Psychologists, Psychiatrists and Nurse Practitioners. In 2015, Social workers were granted a two-tiered licensing process and remain the only profession to have this. MFTs should be afforded the same employment opportunities as social workers. Currently, 28 states have implemented a tiered licensing process for MFTs which has been recognized as a best practice by the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT). Connecticut has been recognized as a leader in identifying and implementing best practices in the MFT field. By creating an associate license, Connecticut will continue to be a state that others will want to emulate. Connecticut, as well as other states, has seen a rise in the need for mental health professionals to provide for our citizens. Passing this legislation will ensure that mental health professionals will continue to live, work and treat patients in Connecticut.

Maryann LaBella, M.A., Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist: Ms. LaBella supports this legislation that would provide parity with social workers to allow MFT's the same employments opportunities. In the past, the DPH has opposed these 0efforts for the legitimate reason of understaffing. We appreciate this concern; however, passing this legislation does not require the license to be issued immediately. This would be a first step and will provide a comfort to MFTs knowing that ultimately it can be easily instituted because of the relatively small size of the MFT community.

.Buddy Toth, Graduate, Southern Connecticut State University: Mr. Toth emphasizes that implementing this tiered licensure would not cost the state any more money than our current system would not negatively impact the quality of care provided by mental health workers. Rather he believes enacting this bill would provide additional consumer protection through required continuing education under the regulatory oversight of the Department of Public Health.

Susan Sidway, LMFT, Sidway Counseling LLC: Ms. Sidway notes that this legislation removes a significant barrier to MFTs seeking licensure in Connecticut. It is important to note that MFT training is 100% clinical. Currently, four institutions of higher education have an MFT graduate program in Connecticut. On average, these programs produce 100-120 graduates in a year. Although this is a small number, these individuals can have a positive impact on our citizens as our society continues to see an increase for mental health issues.

An additional 35 pieces of testimony were submitted in support of this legislation stating the same reasons as expressed above.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None submitted.

