



State of Connecticut
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Good Morning Co-Chairman Steinberg and Daugherty, Ranking Members Petit and Somers, and distinguished members of the Public Health committee.

My name is Pat Wilson Pheanious. I represent the 53rd District (Ashford, Willington and Tolland). Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Raised bill No 7198 An Act Concerning Social Workers.

I must oppose this bill.

The proposed adjustment to existing statutes may have been intended to protect the public from substandard services by restricting the use of the term “social worker” to those qualified for practice. Unfortunately that important goal is not achieved by the language of the proposal. In fact, as it is written, the bill could damage professional practice and undermine the seven institutions that educate professional social workers in our state.

In the bill as proposed, the wording of sections (a) and (b) would disallow individuals with social work degrees who are not licensed from using the title of social worker. **All social workers in Connecticut who have completed a professional course of study from an accredited school of social work should have the right to use the title whether or not they are licensed.**

The problems presented by the language of the proposed bill can be remedied by leaving section (a) and (b) unaltered, and instead adding a section c. The language below, recommended by the CT Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), appropriately limits the use of the title and provides a sanction for misuse.

[c] No person shall use the title of social worker unless said person has attained a baccalaureate or masters degree in social work from a council on Social World Education accredited program or a doctoral degree in social work. Persons using the title of social worker without a degree in social work may be fined an amount not to exceed \$250 and ordered to cease to use the title of social worker until such time that they acquire the degree of social work as defined in this section. The Commissioner of Public Health or their designated representative, will be responsible for enforcement of this Act.

It might help to clarify an apparent misunderstanding. Professional social workers in Connecticut practice at the baccalaureate, masters and doctoral levels. But every professional social worker is NOT eligible or required to have a license. Non clinical practice is not licensed. Professionally trained social workers may apply their craft in administration, policy, community organization, teaching and other non-clinical functions including politics. (You may be aware that six representatives and one senator in this General Assembly are Masters level social workers (Reps. Gilcrest, Walker, McCarthy-Vehey, Lopes, Hughes, myself, and Senator Cassano) We all identify proudly with our profession. I don't believe that many of us are licensed.

In order to be licensed as a Masters Social worker (LMSW), a person having earned an accredited Masters degree, would also need to pass the nationally recognized Master Exam of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). Once licensed as an LMSW, to be a clinician (i.e. earn the LCSW) (s)he would also have to complete 3,000 hours of clinical practice including 100 hours of direct supervision under an LCSW or other named professional), and pass the Clinical Exam of ASWB.

Protecting the title “Social Worker” will help to insure the quality of social work practice in Connecticut. Social work significantly affects the lives of so many people. Social workers practice in industry, advocacy, community planning and politics. We work in family services, child guidance, hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, schools, private practice, addiction services, resident facilities, mental health clinics, senior centers, home care, dialysis centers, veterans programs, community action agencies, public defenders offices, and courts. We provide important services in DCF, DSS, DOC, in universities, and in insurance companies. In all settings our clients are usually the most vulnerable people—the young, the old, the infirm and those in the most conflicted and troubling circumstances.

Restricting the use of the social work title will help insure that when the public seeks competent assistance from our profession they will be protected from people who would intervene in their lives without the appropriate skill, preparation, or supervision—without the guidance of established practice norms and ethical standards. Title protection promotes high standards of professional performance and also provides recourse for persons who are harmed by inappropriate practice.

It is important to note that virtually every client contact profession in this state except social work enjoys title protection. I am also an attorney licensed to practice in this state. I would never be allowed to practice law before our courts or call myself an attorney without having completed a carefully regulated course of study, and passing Connecticut’s Bar Exam. Likewise, doctors, nurses, psychologists, physical therapists and even massage therapist in Connecticut are licensed and enjoy title protection. Can you imagine consulting a “doctor” and not knowing that he or she had finished medical school—or entrusting your mental health to a psychologist or your legal affairs to a lawyer whom you did not know was informed by professional training or bound by a code of ethics? Of course not.

Yet right now in Connecticut, a person with inadequate preparation, or with no preparation at all, can hold themselves out as a “social worker” and undertake the most sensitive work with an unsuspecting public! In Connecticut today, a person can freely intervene in vulnerable lives or family systems, and go about the practice of whatever they might choose to call “social work”, without the benefit and structure of tested practice standards, specified values, ethical guidance or, until fully trained—without being required to perform under competent supervision. This is not only unsafe, it is unfair and it is not right!

In America, 39 states protect their vulnerable citizens from the unregulated practice of social work. Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine and New Jersey, all have social work title protection in place. It is time for Connecticut to demonstrate that we care as much for the rights of our most vulnerable people as do our sister states.

In closing I ask that you consider re-writing this bill to include the recommended language in order to support professional practice, protect the title of “social worker” and bring important protections to people who desperately need this service.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. I would be happy to respond to any questions.