Support for Senate Bill 530 P.N. 1166

HB 445 and SB 530 would amend the Social Workers, Marriage & Family Therapists and Professional Counselors Act to create practice protection and update the scope of practice for clinical social workers. Practice protection ensures that only those who hold a professional license to deliver clinical social work services in Pennsylvania may provide such services and treatment. Pennsylvania is severely behind in this essential step towards consumer protection. The Act will also be amended to add "diagnosis" to the clinical social worker scope of practice. **This legislation would ensure Pennsylvania joins every state in the nation, other than Montana, in establishing a method of protection for Pennsylvania citizens in the receipt of mental health services.**

Pennsylvania currently has no restrictions on who can provide clinical mental health treatment services. Services are provided to a wide array of individuals facing many different life challenges. At a time when individuals and families are in crisis, they are not just looking for someone with whom to talk; they are seeking a person with the education, experience, and appropriate credentials to deliver mental health services. Creation of practice protection for clinical social workers would ensure that providers meet competency standards and adhere to ethical practice. Currently, anyone can hang out a sign and claim to deliver mental health services within the Commonwealth when they may not be equipped to provide those services. Take the following as examples:

• A social worker lost his/her license in the state of New York for an unknown reason. Rather than fulfill obligations set forth by the New York State Board, this professional relocated his/her private practice to Pennsylvania because it is the only surrounding state that does not require licensure to practice.

• Another professional is also practicing in Pennsylvania without a professional license. A sexual abuse survivor seeks out this professional's services to address recurring trauma. This professional tells this survivor that they are unwilling to accept private health insurance and the client pays for services out of pocket. The reality is this professional is not licensed and therefore they are not eligible for reimbursement from private health insurance companies. There is no accountability in place to protect this already victimized individual.

The State Board of Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, and Professional Counselors, is the only regulated board that does not have legal practice protection in place. A modest step forward, the proposed basic practice protection ensures that individuals providing clinical social work services are regulated in some way by the government. They either

work for regulated entities or are licensed providers regulated by the Pennsylvania Department of State. There must be a minimum level of values, skill, and responsibility for all who practice clinical social work to adequately ensure public protection.

In addition to the creation of practice protection, this legislation would add "diagnosis" to the scope of practice for licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs), which 45 states already have in place. Even though insurance companies presently accept diagnostic codes from LCSWs for services rendered, it is critical that diagnosis be added to the scope of practice for LCSWs, as it is a professional privilege already being applied**. Every state surrounding Pennsylvania allows licensed clinical social workers to diagnose clients**, putting Pennsylvania at a competitive disadvantage in terms of the services social workers can provide to their clients.

The National Association of Social Workers is the largest membership organization for professional social workers, serving 132,000. In Pennsylvania alone, NASW-PA represents nearly 5,000 members and works to enhance the professional growth and development of social workers, to create and maintain social work standards, and to advance sound social policies.