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## WCHSA Presentation to the Legislative Council Study Committee on Occupational Licensing

Date: 11/15/2022

Time: 10 AM

Location: Wisconsin State Capitol, Room 411 South

Speakers: Greg Winkler, Deputy Director, Rock County Human Services Department  
Renee Soroko, Deputy Director, Winnebago County Department of Human Services  
John Tuohy, Executive Director, Wisconsin County Human Services Association

The presentation will cover three points:

- Describe the impact of current licensing delays for counsellors, social workers and substance abuse professionals on services delivered by county human service departments.
- Express support for additional resources for the Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) through the state budget process to improve licensing services.
- Express support for Wisconsin to join interstate licensing compacts and allow more reciprocity recognition of occupational licenses issued by other states.

### 1. Impact of Current Licensing Delays on County Human Services Departments (Renee Soroko)

- The current occupational licensing system is overloaded and professional license applicants frequently encounter delays in the approval process, getting questions answered, and status updates.
  - DSPS staff currently struggle to process license applications timely. Department staff do the best they can with existing resources, but the agency is understaffed and needs better technology.
  - Applicants for professional licenses often encounter long delays for application review and may have to resubmit materials due to lost/misplaced documents.
  - Applicants currently do not have an easy way to check application status or timeline and encounter long waits when calling. Applicants and their employers may escalate licensing problems to higher levels within DSPS which creates extra work for all involved to process the license.
  - The current situation is frustrating for both professionals needing licensure, DSPS as the licensing agency, and County Departments as the employer.
- The impact of licensing delays on the human service workforce may put county agencies in a difficult position of using unlicensed staff that are underqualified for human service work.
  - Licensing requirements were established to ensure that persons performing professional level work have the qualifications to perform at that level.
  - Lowering the qualifications required for human service positions negatively affects service provision and is a detriment to the profession.
  - Para-professionals have a valuable role in human service departments but are not qualified to complete risk assessments, provide clinical services, determine safety screening, crisis response, etc.

- At a time when human service departments and other employers are dealing with workforce shortage and significant challenges in recruiting/retaining staff, licensing delays further exacerbate the shortage.
  - Licensing delays affect hiring dates and/or limit the type of work that can be performed until licenses are approved.
  - If human service staff encounter delays in renewing their licenses, employers could have to impose duty restrictions, or worse, suspend employment or lose positions if the licenses are not renewed in time.
  - It is traumatic for staff with the risk of duty restrictions or loss of employment hanging over their heads while they are waiting on their license. If staff are given employment extensions while their license is in process, that creates additional personnel work for the county employer.
  - If staff duties are restricted pending license issuance/renewal, county agencies may not be able to use the staff to provide services to clients or bill for their time which directly impacts customer service. Professional credentials are required for certain service provision and for the agency to bill Medicaid or private insurance.
- County human service departments are responsible for serving and protecting vulnerable populations, such as children who are abused or neglected, adults with disabilities, and persons with mental health and substance use disorders.
  - If county agencies are short staffed due to licensing delays, customer service is directly impacted.
  - County agencies are mandated to provide services and can't 'wait list' clients or delay serving consumers who may be at risk for physical abuse, suicide, or overdose. County staff make life and death decisions every day. Licensing delays may prevent agencies from filling vacancies and assigning cases to new workers, which can result in remaining workers having unreasonably high caseloads. High caseloads can lead to unsafe consumer outcomes.
  - Delays in hire dates, restricted duties, staff leaving, etc. can result in frequent worker changes to the customer and/or their family. This negatively impacts them by having to constantly develop a relationship with the new worker. Research shows worker changes are traumatic for human service customers and results in worse outcomes, such as longer stays in out of home care, relapses in substance use, and longer stays in treatment.
  - Improving the professional credential approval process is essential to restore and maintain a credible professional workforce.

## 2. Support Additional Resources for DSPS (John Tuohy)

- WCHSA supports the request by DSPS for additional resources in the 2023-25 state budget process.
  - DSPS needs additional positions to process licenses and respond to applicant inquiries. DSPS also needs budget authority to implement new technology and improve existing licensing systems to provide better service.
  - Authorizing DSPS to expand their operations does not require additional state GPR funding. DSPS has sufficient licensing program revenue to support additional positions and investment in new technology. DSPS should be allowed to use their existing licensing program revenue to improve licensing services.

- The volume of license applications is increasing. DSPS needs to expand their operations to keep up with the volume of applications. The revenue from increased applications will allow DSPS to sustain their expanded operations.
  - Allowing DSPS to use their existing program revenue to increase staff and improve services will benefit county human services and other employers.
    - Improved licensing timeliness will allow county agencies and other employers to operate more efficiently and provide more effective services. County taxpayers will benefit from having better outcomes for human service programs.
    - State taxpayers will benefit from private sector employers being able to fulfill demands for services and being more productive. That will strengthen the state economy and economic growth will ultimately lead to stronger future state tax revenues.
    - Giving DSPS the additional resources they need to improve licensing is a win-win for county human service departments, other employers and the state overall.
  - It is important for DSPS to get additional staff to improve processing of licenses and respond to applicant questions.
    - Applicants want to talk with licensing staff when they have questions about the status of their application. We all know the value of being able to talk to a real person when you want to resolve a problem.
    - Licensing systems should be enhanced with customer portals to allow applicants to see the status of their license and timeline for issuance, which will help to reduce the volume of inquiries to DSPS
- 3. Interstate Compacts and Reciprocity Applications (Greg Winkler)**
- WCHSA encourages the study committee to recommend and promote Wisconsin participation in interstate compacts with other states, particularly for the professions related to county human services such as counsellors, social workers and substance use professionals.
    - Interstate compacts allow for efficient licensing of persons coming to Wisconsin from other states. Wisconsin is currently part of several interstate compacts including Physicians, Nurses, Psychologists, and others. Expanding the number of compacts that Wisconsin participates in will reduce the DSPS workload and allow for more efficient licensing of those professions. In particular, being a member of a compact will allow Wisconsin to very quickly authorize qualified professionals from other compact states to practice in Wisconsin.
    - There are two current interstate compacts of interest to human services departments: The Counseling Compact and the Social Work Compact.
    - The Counseling Compact has been adopted by at least 14 states and Wisconsin should adopt legislation in the 2023 legislative sessions to join the Counseling Compact. This will allow for substantial improvement in counsellor licensing once the compact is active.
    - The Social Work Compact has been drafted and the public comment period has closed. This compact is expected to be available for legislatures to adopt in 2023 and is proposed to become active after adoption by 7 states. Wisconsin should adopt a resolution expressing support for the social worker compact and adopt the compact itself in a future legislation session when the compact is completed.

- Reciprocity laws are established to allow DSPS to recognize licenses issued by other states with substantially equivalent licensing requirements. When another state is considered substantially equivalent, applicants are typically eligible for a Wisconsin license by submitting proof of licensure in the other state. This is a much smoother pathway than having to start a new application and compile the supporting documents.
  - The current DSPS website has a list of jurisdictions that have been determined to be ineligible for reciprocity for certain occupational licenses. Persons from those states must submit full applications to obtain a Wisconsin license.
  - While the current list is beneficial, it would be very helpful for DSPS to also publicly post and publicize a list of jurisdictions that are eligible for reciprocity. This will be a tremendous advantage to potential applicants from other states, especially our neighbors, who are considering joining the workforce in Wisconsin.
  - Having access to the full reciprocity lists will assist county human service departments to target recruitment efforts. County agencies will be better able to advise applicants on how to get a license from another state recognized in Wisconsin.
  - Allowing DSPS to increase their staff will allow more support for reciprocity applications because researching the licensing requirements in other states is a labor-intensive process.
  - These comments regarding reciprocity are consistent with language in LRB 0462 which is included as a document on the agenda for today's committee meeting.
  
- With the current workforce shortage, Wisconsin needs to be more competitive in attracting workers to allow our state economy to continue to grow.
  - Attracting workers from other states is an important economic development strategy. State demographic trends show the workforce shortage will continue into the future. There are not enough workers to fill all of the jobs in Wisconsin, including county human service jobs.
  - Attracting workers from other states is particularly important for border counties. We need to make it easier for people licensed in neighboring states to work here in Wisconsin.
  - The trend in human services is to allow more remote supervision of staff and provide telehealth services. Human service professionals often practice in multiple states, making it more important to recognize licenses issued in other states.
  - Reducing barriers to out-of-state applicants through interstate compacts and reciprocity applications is essential to efforts to attract workers from other states.

WCHSA appreciates the opportunity to provide information to the Study Committee on Occupational Licensing and thanks the committee members for their attention to the impact of licensing on county human service departments.