



TESTIMONY BY MARC HERSTAND, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS, WISCONSIN CHAPTER, BEFORE THE LEGISLATIVE STUDY COMMITTEE ON OCCUPATIONAL LICENSES ON NOVEMBER 15, 2022

Chairperson Stafsholt, Vice-Chairperson Sortwell and members of the Legislative Study Committee on Occupational licenses.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss proposals to speed the processing of licensing application at the Department of Safety and Professional Services.

In my 30 years as the Executive Director of NASW WI, I have never seen such a backlog in applications as has existed over the last couple of years. Although I have seen some improvement over the last six months since LicenseE was implemented and the Department brought in some temporary staff from other Departments, I am still receiving phone calls and emails from social work licensure applicants who are struggling to get licensed. The situations are extremely frustrating. I have had members lose jobs they were offered, not able to apply for positions they wanted or forced to do a lower level of work at their agency because they were not officially licensed. Agencies have had to set up waiting lists for clients needing mental health services, because of this backlog of applications. I have heard from social workers from other states who want to move to Wisconsin and go to work here but are stymied by huge delays in the processing of their application.

I have heard the terrible stories about applicants on hold for hours, leaving repeated messages and sending repeated emails to no avail.

As committee members are likely well aware, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for mental health services, whether it be in schools or in mental health clinics has increased tremendously.

The Covid-19 pandemic has tremendously increased anxiety, depression, isolation in Wisconsin. The Office of Children's Mental Health reported that one-third of young adults (18-24) experience anxiety on most days. It showed an increase in teen girls (ages 12-17) treated in Emergency Departments for suicide attempts than before the pandemic. It also reported that at the start of the 2021-2022 school year, almost half of Wisconsin parents reported frequently feeling down, depressed, or hopeless. Overall, their research shows an increase in young adults experiencing any mental illness, in suicide attempts, in teens considering suicide, in high school students feeling sad or hopeless, in children with emotional, behavioral or development conditions and in adolescents experiencing a major depressive episode.¹

The situation among young people in this country is so bad that U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a public health advisory on the mental health challenges confronting youth, a crisis exacerbated by pandemic hardships.

According to the Surgeon General's report, symptoms of depression and anxiety have doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms. There also appear to be increases in negative emotions or behaviors such as impulsivity and irritability — associated with conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD.

And, in early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to the same period in early 2019, according to research cited in the advisory.²

The Department of Safety and Professional Services has always been understaffed. About seven years ago I spoke with the then one staff person for all the social work applications who told me she was six weeks behind in responding to emails and phone calls. But the understaffing issue has worsened exponentially over the last five years. As reported in the December 8, 2021, article in the Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel³, although the number of applications has more than doubled, the credentialing staff has barely grown. Ironically, through the credential holder fees, the Department receives plenty of money to hire the staff needed to answer phone calls, email messages and process applications promptly. However, through a legal quirk, the Department is required to obtain “position authority” to hire staff. In the 2021-2023 budget, Governor Evers requested position authority for ten new staff, which would have greatly helped clear up the backlog in applications. The Wisconsin Council on Mental Health, a statewide non-partisan group that provides recommendations to state government on the needs of people with mental illness, sent a letter to the Joint Finance Committee asking them to support this request. However inexplicitly the Joint Finance Committee only agreed to three new positions. As one of DSPS’s credential holders I would expect that my fees would go to providing the Department with the staff to promptly process applications. This is clearly not the case.

To use an analogy, if a business found its customer base doubling in size, as soon as possible they would hire the staff they needed to serve the increase in customers. In this situation you have a State Department that has experienced a doubling in initial applications over five years, has plenty of money to hire the staff they need to handle this increase in applications but is blocked from doing so by the State Legislature. This action makes no rational sense.

Although the backlog of applications has been terrible and unacceptable, I do have to give DSPS credit for trying to do the best with a woefully understaffed department. This is the first administration over the last several decades that has reached out to our organization asking for suggestions on how to improve operations. They have reached out repeatedly and have been open to my suggestions.

The provision of adequate staff is the most important action the State Legislature could take to address this terrible backlog. Until this understaffing is addressed the legislators and the professional associations, like the one I represent, will continue to hear from extremely upset licensees whose phone calls and emails to the Department are unanswered because the Department does not have enough staff to answer all the phone calls and emails while they are also trying process the huge number of applications they receive.

Beyond allowing DSPS to hire the staff they need for the customer demand, there are other legislative remedies that could be helpful.

The social work profession is currently finalizing a Social Work Compact, which would make it extremely simple for social work licensees from other states to get licensed here. It would also allow clinical social workers in Wisconsin to provide tele-mental health services to clients in other states in the Compact and vis-a-versa. I am hoping I can present this Compact to the Legislature for consideration in 2023.

In one of the early hearings of this committee, there was a presentation on a Universal Licensure Recognition bill. We are currently studying the provisions of this bill. One of the shortcomings of such a bill is that, unlike a Compact, it does not address the issue of providing mental health and other social work services to clients outside

of Wisconsin. On the other hand, similar to the Social Work Compact, it does appear to make it simple for licensees from other states to obtain licensure here.

A Provisional Licensure bill, which passed in the State Senate but stalled in the Assembly Committee on Regulatory Licensing Reform, could be very beneficial in that it would allow applicants for licensure to go to work immediately while they are waiting to get their applications processed.

Any of these bills could add more work to staff at DSPS and cause even greater delays in application processing or in the ability of DSPS to answer the phone, answer emails or help customers in counter service. Therefore, once again the first priority must be to allow DSPS to use their own money from certificate holder like myself to hire the staff they need to serve their customers.

I am happy to answer any questions.

1. <https://children.wi.gov/Documents/ResearchData/OCMH%20Annual%20Report%202021.pdf>
2. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-07/surgeon-general-advisory-youth-mental-health-crisis-looms>
3. Madeline Heim – USA TODAY NETWORK / Wisconsin / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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Marc Herstand, MSW CISW
Executive Director
National Association of Social Workers, Wisconsin Chapter
16 N. Carroll Street, Suite 800
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 257-6334
(608) 320-1207 (cell)
(608) 257-8233 (FAX)
Mherstand.naswwi@socialworker.org