

The Oregon Society of Clinical Social Workers

Testimony on Senate Bill 302 before Senate Health Care and Human Services Committee

Good afternoon, Chair Monnes-Anderson and members of the committee, I am Dave Reinhard, representing the Oregon Society of Clinical Social Workers. The organization's president, John Milnes, would have liked to be here today, but a packed schedule of clients, has prevented him from doing so.

The society applauds many of what appear to be the goals of SB 302. We've been told that it was designed to spark a conversation on Oregon's many boards and commissions. We're happy to join in that conversation, if only so we can point out that the State Board of Licensed Social Workers does not appear to be one of the state's "problem" boards or commissions and that OSCSW has no complaints about management or conduct of the board. On the contrary.

SB 302 also appears to be designed to consolidate administrative functions and, in the process, save money. That is, of course, a noble goal. Who could be against ending administrative redundancy and saving a few bucks? Not OSCSW.

But this complex bill, as we read it, goes beyond a simple administrative consolidation. SB 302 removes about 90% of the powers of the State Board of Licensed Social Workers. Our board would only retain role in formulating policy regarding licensure standards and the ethics code. The social workers' board, would give up any role in interpreting licensing standards, applying the social work ethics code or meting out discipline to wayward professionals. Those tasks would be left to the new Oregon Health Licensing Agency. In short, SB 302 would end decades of the social work profession's ability to connect the expertise of the profession with the application of licensing standards and regulatory outcomes of the profession. The board wouldn't even retain an advisory role in these matters.

We don't think we're over-reacting, but our view is that this mega-consolidation would be bad for clinical social workers and others licensed professionals in the mental health arena, particularly at a time when we're all being whipsawed by healthcare reform. At the very least, the proposal would make it hard to find good appointees to the board of clinical social workers. After all, who wants to serve on an essentially neutered board?

Fortunately, we think there's a way to achieve all of Senator Johnson's policy goals in the mental health licensing arena, and we are grateful the senator has been more than open to considering this approach. Rather than throwing all nine boards together, one approach would be to start by, say, turning the three mental health boards – the Board of Psychologist Examiners, the Board of Licensed Counselors and Therapists, and the Board of Licensed Social Workers – into the combined Office of Behavioral Health and Social Work Licensure.

Such approach would achieve administrative consolidation, including the elimination of two director positions, and the integration of computer, investigative and other administrative systems. At the same time, it would retain a strategic focus at all staff levels on behavioral health and social work in service of boards that actually make decisions. It might also serve as a pilot project for the consolidation of boards and commissions in other arenas.

Of course, many specific issues would still need to be worked out and, although we think the concept is sound, OSCSW is open to other options and is willing to work with Senator Johnson, this committee and our sister organizations on this important issue.