

Dear Representative Jenkins and House Education Committee:

I am writing to express my opposition to HB 5040, which is currently under review. The intent of the bill is to protect the religious rights of counseling students, allowing them to be exempted from providing treatment if a patient's goal is in conflict with the student's "sincerely held religious belief or moral convictions." While reasonable at face value, it offers no definition as to what constitutes a legitimate belief or conviction. Originally crafted in reaction to a student's unwillingness to treat a homosexual client, the broad language allows any student to decide who they will or will not treat.

This is not the first time the phrase "sincerely held religious beliefs or moral convictions" has called legislators' motivation into question. As you well know, only three months ago, it was removed from Michigan's anti-bullying law, as it actually allowed bullies to legitimize their actions. It is now evident that the decision to remove the phrase from that bill was made in response to public outrage and nationwide ridicule, rather than any recognition of its impact.

In drafting a bill to accommodate one counseling student's personal views on homosexuality, both the student and legislators fail to grasp that during treatment, it is not at all unusual to discover that what a client considers being most true about his or herself may actually be the cause of their internal conflict. The list of scenarios is endless. Clients seeking to affirm their homosexuality may discover they are not actually gay. A heterosexual being treated for aggression may find his behavior is based upon a conflicted sexual orientation. A pregnant teen from a pro-life family may, after multiple sessions, reveal that she wants an abortion. The examples are simplified, as is the wording in the bill, but the question remains, how do students learn to treat such revelations if they may reject a client based solely on what is presented to them during intake?

As a proud graduate of Michigan State University's MSW program, I have experience spanning 30 years in a variety of practice settings. In addition to providing direct service as a counselor and therapist, I now devote the majority of my time providing supervision, training and consultation to other mental health providers in Michigan, 16 other states and as of late, Ireland. I can say, without reservation, that effective education of mental health professionals involves far more than learning theory and technique. The ability to effectively assess, diagnose and treat a problem comes from developing professional competence.

To do so, mental health practitioners must be aware of their own beliefs, assumptions and life histories, and be open to exploring how those might impact working relationships with clients so they don't unduly impose their values on the clients who come to them. Typically, this is done within supervisory relationships and it is a process that continues over time. Students in these fields are just beginning to engage in this self-reflective learning process. If professional education does not include experiences that require students to learn how to maintain effective working relationships with others whose problems, lifestyles or characteristics make them uncomfortable, then we are not preparing them to function with competence or confidence.

There is no shortage of situations that present themselves daily to a counselor, social worker or psychologist that will raise some very uncomfortable feelings or be in direct violation of one's personal

belief system. We cannot typically refuse to work with these people. However, quality training and supervision, beginning in our universities and continuing in the workplace, is what will facilitate all clients receiving quality mental health services delivered by competent professionals. Students need to know that they will be supported during their educational experience to learn how to effectively explore and learn from the dilemmas these situations present while they are still in school.

Professional organizations and Michigan universities report that if passed, Michigan HB5040 will have serious ramifications for our State. First, our universities may not be able to meet nationally established accreditation standards in professional fields that include social work, psychology, counseling and psychiatry. Secondly, Michigan students seeking employment in these fields may be forced to go to colleges and universities in other states. Our schools of higher learning must be allowed to prepare their students for what they will most definitely experience; otherwise they will graduate inferior, less marketable practitioners and the population as a whole will suffer for it.