

Testimony – S.B. 4
Senate Judiciary Committee
April 28, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this issue.

I am Susan Grettenberger, speaking in opposition to S.B. 4, commonly referred to as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. I am a licensed social worker, a professor and director of the social work program at Central Michigan University, and the Vice President of Social Policy for the National Association of Social Workers, Michigan Chapter (NASW- Michigan). Today, I am speaking on behalf of NASW-Michigan.

This bill violates social work professional requirements and has the potential to harm many people, including clients who rely on the services of unbiased and objective social workers. It would allow a social worker or other professional to legally refuse to serve people based on that social worker's religious beliefs, regardless of the immediacy of need or intensity of crisis of the person seeking services.

The profession of social work holds to a Code of Ethics which states that we, as a profession serving the needs of vulnerable, at risk and marginalized populations, will respect and support the ability of people to have self-determination. This includes access to needed services. Explicitly, the Code of Ethics prohibits social workers from practicing, condoning, facilitating or collaborating with any form of discrimination on the basis of many characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability (4.02, NASW Code of Ethics, attached). Further, all social workers are directed to act to prevent discrimination against any person based on these same characteristics (6.04, NASW Code of Ethics). Social Workers are duty-bound to not discriminate in their practice, and to actively work to prevent discrimination.

This proposal would suggest that social workers have the right to violate the profession's ethical obligations, which are the values agreed upon by the profession nationally. Michigan's licensure law, similar to social work license laws nationwide, requires adherence to a standard of inclusion and cultural competency, standards linked to the Code of Ethics. Therefore, refusal to provide service to specific clients would put social workers at risk of violating our profession's licensure laws and expectations.

While on its face, S.B. 4 allows individuals to act on their own beliefs; in practice it would create a great harm to society as social workers are the providers of many public services in the areas of child welfare, mental health, public safety, corrections, substance abuse, domestic violence, and more. For instance, Workers opposed to war on religious grounds could refuse to serve military families. Child welfare workers, and potentially whole agencies, could refuse to serve families or

even foster children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. Social workers whose religious beliefs exclude the use of alcohol could refuse a client in need of help with addiction. These examples illustrate that clients in need of services could be harmed by this act.

Supporters of this bill claim such refusals are not what will happen, but here in Michigan we already see this type of discrimination by professionals. Krista and Jami Contreras were refused medical care for their daughter Bay who was born last October. Their pediatrician simply said no to working with people who are gay. The Governor and Lt. Governor have devoted considerable time, energy and money, through the Mental Health and Wellness Commission and its subsequent report, to find ways of increasing access to mental health services. S.B. 4 would regress that back by reducing access to service. Reducing services to vulnerable populations, such as those affected by mental health challenges, poses a human risk to the person who does not receive services and even a public health risk for people who are under threat of violence, of committing violence or self-harm due to mental illness.

This proposal also troubles me as a social work educator. In accordance with the profession's mission to serve all vulnerable populations and its Code of Ethics, social work program accreditation standards require us to teach all students to serve all populations and to practice in a nondiscriminatory manner. S.B. 4 contradicts those standards and would leave social work programs across the state at risk of losing accreditation. Agencies could refuse to work with students who are LGBT. Social service agencies may receive interns who refuse to work with specific populations, jeopardizing their own programs, threatening the university social work program's accreditation, and harming clients.

One might argue that in the case of one worker's refusal to service a client, services could be provided by another person. This is frequently not an option. Often, program workers are overburdened and unable to absorb additional clients. Other workers at an agency may share those religious values, particularly in an organization which is faith-based and hires within the faith. In Michigan's many rural areas, often there are very few or even only one social worker providing specific services for several counties. That worker's refusal to serve a client would functionally remove services, often publicly funded, from that client.

From a professional standpoint, a Code of Ethics standpoint, a licensure standpoint, an educational and National accreditation standpoint, and from a human standpoint, NASW-Michigan opposes S.B. 4.

I thank the committee for their time and I welcome any questions you may have.