

NYS Joint Committee on Mental Hygiene Hearing

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Good morning. My name is Shakira A. Kennedy, and I am the Executive Director for the National Association of Social Workers, New York State Chapter. I want to thank the Committee on Mental Hygiene members for the invitation to testify today. It is an honor and privilege to provide testimony and represent our membership and the nearly 64,000 licensed social workers in the state.

Social workers provide most mental and behavioral health services in the country. In New York State there are 63,555 licensed social workers compared to 15,187 licensed psychologists, 9,727 licensed mental health counselors, and 1,461 licensed marriage and family therapists (New York State Education Department, 2022). The National Association of Social Workers is the largest professional organization for social workers across the country. The New York State Chapter (NASW-NYS) is responsible for advocating for social work members and non-members. Now, more than ever, New Yorkers are seeking services provided by social workers. All efforts must be made to attract and retain social work professionals to meet the heightened need for mental and behavioral health services in local communities.

To adequately address the mental health crisis in the state, there must be a focus on the recruitment and retention of social workers. Data from the 2022 Social Work Salary Analysis Report, presented by NASW-NYS, discloses that universally, social workers across all demographics assert that salaries are low and not comparable to the work and skill set required to serve clients and program users. For most professions, salaries increase with education and licensing. Unfortunately, that is not the case for social work. Data reveals that as the skill set of social workers increases, salaries stay stagnant. Not only are social workers faced with low base salaries, but they are also burdened with high amounts of educational debt from their social work programs.

The New York State Licensed Social Worker Loan Forgiveness (LSWLF) Program is a valuable initiative designed to bolster the number of licensed social workers serving in crucial human service sectors. The program targets areas of critical need, including home care, health, mental health, substance abuse, aging, HIV/AIDS and child welfare or communities with multilingual needs. The program was first introduced in the state's budget in 2014. At the program's inception, the state's budget allocated \$1,228,000 to HESC for social work loan forgiveness. A year later the program was funded at \$1,478,000. In 2016, and every year since the program received \$1,728,000 for social work loan forgiveness. The state funding for the LSWLF program has only increased by \$500,000 and has not received any additional funding since 2016, nearly seven years ago. Each year, our members apply for this program and never receive a response upon submitting their applications. NASW-NYS inquired about where the funds are being spent. Unfortunately, we haven't had success in communicating with HESC. If loan forgiveness subsidies are unavailable for most social workers, they may leave the profession. Advocating for increased funding for loan

forgiveness incentives is a crucial step in addressing the growing demand for mental health providers. The heightened need for mental health services underscores the importance of supporting and incentivizing professionals in the field.

NASW-NYS, in collaboration with Assemblymember Gunther and Senator May's offices, has taken proactive steps to address the mental health crisis in the state. The introduction of legislation, specifically NYS A8375/S8218, demonstrates a commitment to incentivizing the social work profession and targeting underserved and rural communities. NASW-NYS strongly supports NYS A8375/S8218, which would provide loan forgiveness awards for social workers who commit to work in counties with less than two hundred thousand population, or towns that have a population of less than one hundred fifty persons per square mile for the duration of the award.

The introduction of The Social Worker Student Loan Incentive Program is a worthy initiative that addresses the critical shortage of social workers, particularly in underserved communities. Here are a few key points: 1) the program directly responds to the critical shortage of social workers, which has become a pressing issue in the current tight labor market affecting social workers; 2) thousands of unfilled social worker job openings, that are unfilled specific challenges are faced by the 44 counties with populations under 200,000 and the 71 towns in non-rural counties with population densities below 150 people per square mile; 3) the potential positive impact on communities and the economy, including job creation, improved social services, and the overall enhancement of the quality of life in underserved regions cannot be understated; and finally, 4) the program encourages a commitment from graduates to practice in underserved communities, creating a long-term solution to address the social worker shortage.

The National Association of Social Workers, New York State Chapter, is willing to work with other committee members to assist with further legislative development in other needed capacities.

Thank you for your time.

References

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