

Madam Chair and Committee Members,

My name is Marge Ellefson and I am the executive secretary for the North Dakota Board of Counselor Examiners. This concerns the Behavioral Boards Collaborative Report as requested by HB 1048.

Thank you for this opportunity to clarify various points and address concerns I heard at the interim committee meeting in late July. Due to time constraints that day, I was poised to approach the podium but did not get the chance.

What I was hearing that day were words like "barriers" describing supervision, and a concern of requirements being too strict. Although reported in the Behavioral Health Boards collaborative report presented to the committee, I will further explain how this board sent out letters to 49 states asking for reciprocity agreements. Although we only heard back from about a dozen, or 25%, none of the states that responded would enter into a reciprocity agreement with this state, some because their requirements are not necessarily more strict, but different, and some because their requirements were more strict than ours. Boards along the years hone their requirements and procedures to enhance the process and what works best to protect the public. None of the responding states were willing to alter their own requirements for reciprocity purposes. To do that destroys consistency. If the integrity of the license is jeopardized, that will be noticed sooner than later, possibly by insurance providers first.

Over the years, state wide and nationwide, counselors responsibilities grow increasingly greater. In years past Masters degrees in counseling were 24-36 credits, and the norm now is becoming a 60 Hr. Masters, including a 700 hour internship and practicum, all prior to post masters supervised experience, a standardized test and continuing education requirements. Again, this is nationwide that these standards have been continually increasing in an attempt to protect the vulnerable population counselors serve and to be able to serve that population effectively.

The two years of post grad supervised experience is a vital training tool, offering the new counselor a chance to actively provide counseling under a supervisor, who can guide them through counseling procedures, counseling practices and the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics, which is adopted by the board as the ethical guidance for practice. The most advantageous experience is to be supervised by a counseling supervisor with credentials equal to or greater than those the associate counselor is seeking. For some, these two years are the only organized or consistent supervision they will have. Being supervised by a licensed counselor will provide the most complete supervision experience. As I have often said, when we built our home we did not want an electrician who was trained under a plumber.

It is vital that this state have qualified and adequately trained counselors to serve the public. The entire scope of practice for licensed counselors can be found in the Behavioral Health Boards Collaborative Report presented to the committee in July.

This board is extremely open to visiting with other boards, networking and considering more streamlined processes, however, since this board has had to discipline only two counselors since 1999, this board would like to think that the low number of sanctions is due, in part, to the requirements, standards of training and screening set forth during the application process. The concern, purpose and work of this board is to ensure the people of North Dakota have duly qualified counselors available for their mental health needs.