



Joint Legislative Committee on Aging
March 22, 2012

Chairman Naishtat, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding issues facing the aging community.

My name is Sue Milam, and I serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. I am here to call attention to the fact that social workers play an extremely important role in the care continuum of the elderly in our communities. Not only do they serve as direct caregivers, but they also work with families to facilitate the transition from hospital to home and coordinate access to community services.

According to the 2009 annual Report by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, approximately 10%, or 2.58 million people, of the overall population of Texas are over the age of 65. This report also indicated that the department is faced with a major challenge of hiring and maintaining a skilled workforce that can meet the needs of an every-increasing number of older Americans; specifically, a workforce with a background in “specialized geriatric social work training.”

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that social work is one of the occupations most affected by the Baby Boomer retirement phenomenon. Occupations dominated by women, like social work, are especially vulnerable with an aging workforce because women’s level of workforce participation is lower than men’s as they approach retirement age. Clearly, Texas needs to focus on both social work recruitment and retention strategies if it hopes to meet the needs of its elderly citizens.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to fill that role by the fact that they receive training in the profession’s comprehensive assessment framework and a flexible range of interventions to deal with complex biological, social, and psychological barriers. Moreover, social workers understand the value of and the necessity for evidence-based practice, while struggling to maintain the creative, clinical judgment deemed necessary for individual situations.

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act of 2010, there are new models of care that are emerging. The “Medical Home” model encourages an integrated approach where primary care physicians work and freely exchange information with other types of providers to care for the whole patient. These other types of providers include medical specialists, mid-level practitioners and “physician extenders” such as social workers and peer providers who can address behavioral issues and community coordination concerns.

Another new model, the Accountable Care Organization (ACO) is seen as an integrated care organization which provides the full range of medical and mental health services to a population, such as members of a community or employees at a company. An important feature of ACOs is the measurement of quality indicators to ensure that the care being given is effective and appropriate. Here too can be found a variety of roles for social workers, from behavior

management to care coordination and community re-integration. A social worker's training provides a foundation for a variety of functions within an ACO.

The importance of social workers in this new world of health care reform is undisputed. At the same time, social workers face daunting challenges, primarily in the financial realm. In Texas, they receive reimbursement rates that are set at 70 percent of the rate paid to other comparable professionals for the same service, plus in November of 2011, they received another 2 percent rate cut. These increasingly low reimbursements are making it more and more difficult for social workers to continue as providers within the Medicare and Medicaid systems. Many are converting their practices into fee-for-service only as a way of surviving financially.

Texas must support appropriations for fair reimbursement for social workers so they can continue serving the aging population of this state. We hope that the legislature will provide the necessary funding to ensure access to this vulnerable population.

Thank you.

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