

Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk
Health and Government Operations Committee (Chair)

House Bill 345 Interstate Social Work Licensure Compact Health and Government Operations
Committee January 23, 2025 at 2:00p.

Position: SUPPORT

Submitted by: Wholistic Living LLC

Wholistic Living LLC is a private clinical mental health practice specializing in trauma, addictions, and anxiety. We utilize EMDR therapy to address the multifaceted needs of individuals facing mental health and substance use challenges (collectively referred to as behavioral health).

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide this testimony in strong support of House Bill 345. This critical piece of legislation would allow Maryland to join the Interstate Social Work Licensure Compact, enabling Maryland social workers to provide care across state lines in other compact states, while also attracting out-of-state social workers to deliver services to Marylanders. It is a vital step toward addressing the profound behavioral health crisis in our state.

As a clinician, I have witnessed firsthand the growing and urgent demand for mental health services. My practice has seen a marked increase in referrals, particularly for neurologically based trauma care such as EMDR therapy. Despite my best efforts to meet the community's needs, I now maintain a waiting list of over 10 individuals and am inundated with consultation calls. Sadly, many of these individuals must wait months for care during a time when timely intervention can make all the difference.

The behavioral health crisis in Maryland is not anecdotal—it is documented and escalating. A recent report, conducted under the legislation passed by this very General Assembly in 2023 (SB 283/HB 418), paints a sobering picture: Maryland's behavioral health workforce is only **half the size needed** to meet current demands. Even more alarming, **45% of the workforce is expected to leave the field by 2028**, leaving our state in dire need of reinforcements.

The challenge is particularly acute among social workers. In 2023, Maryland employed an estimated **2,799 social workers** in behavioral health settings. To meet the growing need and replace those leaving the field, we will need to attract an additional **2,675 social workers** by 2028—a staggering number that cannot be achieved under the current system.

Compounding this issue is a troubling trend in education and retention. Degree completions from Maryland's social work master's programs have declined by **9% since 2019**, and far too many graduates are either leaving the state or working outside the behavioral health field entirely. Since 2014, **70% of Masters of Social Work and Clinical and Counseling Psychology graduates from Maryland universities have not been retained in jobs providing behavioral health services to Maryland residents.**

The General Assembly has taken commendable steps in recent years to address these issues, but the crisis remains far from resolved. We must be bold and innovative in our approach to expanding access to care and supporting the behavioral health workforce. Interstate licensure compacts are a proven strategy that can yield immediate and meaningful results.

By passing HB 345, we can:

- **Broaden the pool of qualified professionals** who can provide care to Maryland residents.
- **Strengthen partnerships across state lines**, allowing for a seamless delivery of care in an increasingly mobile and interconnected world.
- **Provide Marylanders with access to timely, high-quality mental health and substance use care**, ensuring they are not left waiting for help during their most vulnerable moments.

The need for HB 345 is both practical and moral. Our communities are in crisis, and every day that passes without action is another day that countless Marylanders go without the care they so desperately need.

For these reasons, I urge a favorable report on HB 345. The health and well-being of our residents depend on it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

For further information contact: Shelby John, 410-937-1386