

February 17, 2021

RE: Please support sustaining and growing our mental health workforce HF 970

Dear Chair Fischer and members of the Behavioral Health Policy Division:

We are writing in support of HF 970.

Social workers of color face a myriad of barriers to entry into the profession, beginning from their university studies all the way to full licensure as a social worker.

In the state of Minnesota, social work students must complete internships in both their undergraduate and graduate programs. These are essentially unpaid part time volunteer positions, on top of their full-time educational programs. Many students of color must maintain paying jobs throughout their educational career because they are often first or second-generation immigrants whose families lack accumulated wealth or are from backgrounds in which they and their people have suffered historical institutional discrimination. Now you can imagine the incredibly busy schedules held by these students (part time internship, full time schooling, as well as part time to full time employment). You might be thinking well this isn't unique, all students face these issues. Yes all students face these issues, however students of color carry a disproportionately heavier burden because they do not come from families who have accumulated wealth that can be used to support their housing, their families, the cost of their tuition and books, access to knowledge of scholarships and fellowships etc. This is one reason by HF 970 is asking for additional support for BIPOC professionals.

Once students complete their social work degrees, they must obtain between 100 to 200 hours of supervision during the first two years of employment as a social worker. These are considered their trainee hours. Supervision is not free. Often, employers are unwilling to pay for these supervision hours. Supervision can cost between \$25 to \$50 an hour (and that is on the low end) which is typically paid by the employee themselves (up to \$200 to \$300 a month). This means it could cost a social work trainee anywhere from \$2500 to \$10,000 to complete their supervision hours over a period of two to four years.

Now you are wondering why students would choose such a difficult and expensive profession to get into. Students of color often choose social work as a profession due to their passion for helping others - especially those in their communities; those in need, the vulnerable, and the poor. They have seen and lived through injustices brought upon their communities. They are equipped with the experience and the passion to address these injustices. Ironically, users of social services consist of a higher proportion of people of color due to the very nature of our society in which there is a lack of equal access to quality education, employment, and others sources of income resulting in a cascading effect on educational and employment outcomes for impoverished communities. And now we are seeing these societal barriers within the profession

itself with negative impact on BIPOC social work professionals and their communities including difficulty obtaining licensure for BIPOC social workers due to financial cost, disproportionately low numbers of BIPOC providers in communities of color, low pass rates on the ASWB licensing exam for examinees of color, high attrition rates for social workers of color due to the expense and difficulty in entering and staying in the profession. All this results in less culturally relevant services to communities of color who need social workers who can speak their languages and can understand their cultures.

We fully support the items described in this bill from improved access to supervision, loan forgiveness, and a state sponsored task force to examine efforts to provide a more culturally competent mental health workforce. We strongly urge your support to invest in strengthening our mental health system for all Minnesotans by investing in our workforce.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G Lee Xiong', with a stylized, cursive script.

G Lee Xiong, MSW. LGSW
Minnesota Hmong Social Workers Coalition