

February 17, 2021

**Reference: Sustaining and Growing mental health workforce HF 970**

Dear Honorable Chair Fischer and Members of the Behavioral Health Policy Division

I have been a county social worker since 1984, the first Hmong American social worker in the State of Minnesota, and I have witnessed the urgent need of Mental Health professionals responding to the crises of the BIPOC communities in both urban and the greater Minnesota areas including child welfare, mental health, domestic violence, and chemical dependency. There are more than 100 home languages other than English in the Twin Cities school districts and of course fewer than a dozen in rural and suburban districts. These at-risk Minnesotans are both American-born and foreign-born U.S. citizens and their needs demand for competent Mental Health professionals to step up to reduce their life crises and facilitate their growth to reach and maintain the American dream.

I am submitting this statement to you and members of the Behavioral Health Policy Division to acknowledge the lack of BIPOC (Black Indigenous and People of Color) Mental Health professionals and the challenges in rural communities. I also acknowledge the need for current Mental Health professionals to become more culturally informed and ready to responsively intervene to mitigate the pain and suffering of these Minnesotans. Let me offer you that my experience of limited English proficiency combining with cultural difference has been a basic barrier to become a licensed Mental Health professional/LACDC. In my experience, foreign-born American Mental Health professionals need more times to prepare their study to pass the licensure examination due to their limited English proficiency whereas American-born Mental Health professionals need extra times to learn, understand, and master the culture and the experiences of the BIPOC clients and communities to increase their chance to pass the licensure examination. In both groups, what matter most is the qualitative experience as mental health practitioner will give him or her a stronger chance to pass the licensure examination and be more effective practitioner because he or she gains and masters the English professional language and understands the culture and experiences of the clients in the BIPOC communities.

Finally, this bill provides a comprehensive array of strategies that address building a more informed, competent mental health workforce in our great state of Minnesota. I support the efforts outlined in this bill and strongly urge your support to invest in strengthening our mental health system for all Minnesotans by investing in our workforce.

Thank you very much,

*Neal Thao*

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