



Tennessee Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

A Division of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

April 13, 2016

Bill Haslam, Governor
State Capitol, 1st Floor
600 Charlotte Ave
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Haslam,

The Tennessee Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (TNAMFT), representing nearly 700 Tennessee Marriage and Family Therapists and therapists-in-training, strenuously opposes the enactment of SB1556/HB1840 into law, and urges you to veto this legislation, which our association believes is both discriminatory and unnecessary.

Proponents argue that this bill is necessary to safeguard a counselor or therapist's religious beliefs and moral convictions when a conflict exists between their own and their clients' values. Their argument, however, ignores several crucial points that render this legislation unnecessary at best and damaging to our state and its citizens at worst.

- Professional counselors and therapists already possess the right and the mechanisms by which to refer clients for more appropriate services. Both professional codes of ethics and existing standards of care allow counselors and therapists to provide ethical referrals to clients based on the skills needed to provide the client with the best available services for the client's particular treatment needs.
- Both professional codes of ethics and existing standards of care prohibit counselors and therapists from using this referral process as a means of exercising discrimination against a client or prospective client, thereby ensuring that all those persons in our state who could benefit from our services have equal access to those services.
- Rather than requiring therapists and counselors to strictly adhere to the highest standards of professional mental health service provision, SB1556/HB1840 both lessens these standards and creates a loophole that would limit access to services by those in need. The bill creates opportunities for discriminating against our state's citizens, abusing the client referral process, and circumventing standard provisions in professional ethical codes that exist to protect Tennesseans.
- Despite proponents' claim that this bill protects patients and helps them obtain more appropriate care, the fact that the bill permits counselors and therapists to put their personal beliefs and moral positions above the needs and best interests of the client poses a clear threat to client well-being by limiting access to services, inviting discriminatory practices, and risking further psychological harm to vulnerable others who encounter the rejection of those who are expected to assist them.
- Beyond the direct threat posed to mental health service consumers and the associated negative impact on their families, friends, and employers, this legislation has potentially dire consequences for those citizens not in therapy as it propels our state into the controversial national debate around discriminatory laws and the ensuing economic threats that result. The potential of this legislation for

devastating financial impacts on the state's economy risks harm not only to those who work and participate in Tennessee's therapy community but to all Tennesseans.

Thank you for your time and consideration of the points presented in opposition to this proposed legislation. Please contact our association if we can be of any additional assistance to you in regard to this matter.

Sincerely,

The Tennessee Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barney Self".

Barney Self, Ed.D, LMFT
President, Tennessee Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robbie Robinson Hutchens".

Robbie Robinson Hutchens, M.MFT., LMFT
Legislative Chairperson, Tennessee Association for Marriage and Family Therapy



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