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Good afternoon. I would like to thank Chairman Birdwell and the rest of the esteemed members of the Sunset Commission for the opportunity to testify. I am Miriam Nisenbaum, the Executive Director for the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW/TX) and I represent around 5,300 NASW/TX members who serve Texas residents across the state. We wish to respect the committee's time, so have chosen to have 3 members speak from our Association. Our members are very engaged in this issue and have submitted hundreds of comments to the Sunset Commission regarding their report on our licensing board.

NASW/TX strongly supports the creation of the new consolidated agency: the Behavioral Health Executive Council (BHEC), as recommended by the Sunset Staff in their report released on March 25th. There is one key caveat: we believe that rather than having an executive council made up of all public members, the council should have a 5-4 public majority with the **4 professional members retaining the right to vote**. We want to see the independent Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners (TSBSWE) that fully understands rule making, and scope of practice issues for this profession, housed at an agency that possesses the necessary public health, social work, and mental health expertise to ensure the public's safety and trust is retained. The Association supports all the professions in the proposed BHEC to have independent boards that have sole authority over the rulemaking and scope of practice for each profession.

Social workers apply a unique body of knowledge and skilled techniques to help people overcome social and health problems, such as poverty, mental illness, child abuse and neglect, emotional instability, illness, economic uncertainty, domestic violence, homelessness, and drug abuse. We work directly with individuals, couples, families, and groups to identify and overcome these problems. Some social workers work with communities, organizations, and/or systems to improve services as well as to administrate social and health programs. We practice in a wide array of settings, such as: hospitals, nursing homes, non-profits, the child welfare system, early childhood, gerontology, psychiatric facilities, and private practice to name a few.

Social work in Texas, has multiple levels of licensure. Licensed Bachelor Social Workers help coordinate referrals and perform supportive work. Licensed Masters Social Workers may serve as a case manager or in many other roles and can practice clinical social work in an employment setting under clinical supervision. Licensed Clinical Social Workers may provide any clinical or non-clinical social work services. Clinical Social Work focuses on the independent practice of assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention/treatment of mental illness, emotional, and other behavioral disturbances.

I mention these distinctions, because while social work exists in a similar realm as the other professions recommended for the BHEC, there are differences which require the oversight and administration of an independent board aimed solely at regulating the profession. Under BHEC, the TSBSWE would retain responsibility for licensing and taking enforcement action against practitioners. TSBSWE would also make regulatory decisions, and with a social worker and a public member from the TSBSWE on the BHEC, there would be assurance that their rules were being reviewed by a group with first-hand knowledge of the profession.

Lastly, I would like to assert one fact. The BHEC was not implemented last session not because of any adverse advocacy efforts against the legislation. It was killed while a larger discussion about legislation completely unrelated to the bill swept it up in its wake. The BHEC was voted unanimously out of the Sunset Commission and the House Committee on Public Health and was set to be the next bill to be heard before the clock ran out on May 11th. It was opposed by a vocal but very small group that made up less than a tenth of all the behavioral health providers in Texas.

The Sunset process has found that where the board is currently housed, renders it unable to function efficiently and effectively and is **actively hampering the ability of social workers in Texas to earn a living**. Again we agree with the Commission about the creation of the BHEC and we advocate for professional and private voting members on the Council. The BHEC will streamline services, consolidate resources, and align the behavioral health providers in the state into one unified agency that elevates the status of mental health by signifying the importance of the providers who attend to the needs of their communities.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to reach out to our association.

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