

Statement by the Arkansas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers in Response to Senate Bill 289, the “Medical Ethics and Diversity Act.”

The Arkansas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW/AR) is wholly opposed to Senate Bill 289, the “Medical Ethics and Diversity Act,” which specifically includes social workers. If passed, this bill would remove fundamental protections against discrimination on a broad basis.

Under Ark. Code Ann. §17-103-203, the Arkansas Social Work Licensing Board has the explicit statutory authority to “[e]stablish rules defining unprofessional conduct and set forth and publish a code of ethics and standards for practice.” Section XI(C) of the Arkansas Social Work Licensing Board’s Rules defines unprofessional conduct to include “[r]efusing to provide professional services to a person on the basis of race, religion, creed, color, gender, disability, age, or national origin.”

Social workers are already able to decline to provide services based on their competencies and training, but they cannot discriminate based on selective personal values. No patient should ever be obstructed from receiving legal healthcare based solely on a provider’s personal values. Conscience bills such as SB 289 lead to dysfunctional healthcare delivery and compromise the quality of care by creating barriers to meet patients’ needs.

Conscience legislation such as SB 289 also complicates the healthcare system and compromises any united standard of care. Furthermore, healthcare providers refusing assistance by maintaining a conscientious conviction against providing such care would cause patients and healthcare administrators to search for other health providers to meet patients’ needs. The strain this would put on small-staffed healthcare facilities and patients in rural areas with sparse access to care is unreasonable and unconscionable.

NASW/AR opposes violating patients’ autonomy in choosing the type of health care services they deem most appropriate to their own needs, as well as legislation such as SB 289 that regresses healthcare into a paternalistic system where the provider is the ultimate decision-maker rather than the patient.



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