



Improving the health status of Maine's seasonal workers and their families by providing culturally appropriate care and services.

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services
Testimony of Laura Valencia Orozco on behalf of Maine Mobile Health Program
January 25th, 2024

Supporting:

LD 1990 “An Act to Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement”

Sponsored by Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services, my name is Laura Valencia Orozco, and I am the Director of Behavioral Health at the Maine Mobile Health Program, a Federally Qualified Health Center that provides services to farmworkers and seafood processors and their families in Maine. Our health care access includes behavioral health, dental, vision, and resource navigation. We provide services statewide. We work with patients from diverse backgrounds, with most of them speaking a language other than English.

Because we strongly believe that high quality health care includes access to culturally appropriate mental health services, each of our patients are offered a referral to an in-house behavioral health provider that speaks their language. We currently have two full-time Spanish speaking providers, and a network of part-time, seasonal, Haitian-Creole speaking providers out of Massachusetts for telehealth-only services. Due to the lack of bilingual/bicultural providers in the state of Maine, our Spanish speaking providers often have to travel across the state, driving up to three hours to see patients and relocating seasonally to provide services for different agricultural harvests. Ideally, our patients would have qualified providers available to meet with them locally in their communities. Instead, we are tasked with meeting these gaps by developing a mobile team and recruiting telehealth providers from out of state because in many areas, local bilingual/bicultural providers simply don't exist. These challenges became more evident during the pandemic, when like many other health centers we saw an increased demand for behavioral health services, yet our number of providers has remained the same.

Over the years, we have heard from patients about the importance of having providers that understand not only their language, but also share cultural understanding. This allows patients to talk about mental health without creating stigma and further harm. Because we struggle to connect our patients to bilingual/bicultural social workers in the communities where they live, we were deeply concerned and disturbed to see the data published in 2022 by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) about disparities in first-time pass rates on their standardized exams. By the ASWB's own data, their exam was found to be biased against racial minorities, older adults, and speakers of English as a second language. As a health care center whose patients depend on social workers from diverse backgrounds for quality care, it is clear why this data concerns us.

The ASWB's standardized multiple-choice test is only one part of the social work licensing process, and it is the part that least reflects social work practice. University education, continuing education, and required weekly supervision meetings with a more experienced social worker are all better tests for a social worker's



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competency and ethical behavior, and create better checks and balances for quality of care. We support LD 1990 because it outlines a social work licensing process for Maine that is based on quality care and the best data available, and eliminates over-reliance on standardized testing that has been demonstrated to be biased.

On behalf of Maine Mobile Health Program, thank you for considering our comments. Please feel welcome to contact me directly with any follow-up questions.

Sincerely,

Laura Valencia Orozco

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura Valencia Orozco".

Director of Behavioral Health

Maine Mobile Health Program

207-446-0556

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Sarah Harber
Maine Mobile Health Program
LD 1990

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