

December 2, 2020

To: House Health Policy Members

Re: Support of Senate Bill 0826

Chairman Vaupel and House Health Policy Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to write a letter of support for SB 0826 which would update the mental health code to include Physician Assistants as mental health professionals.

I have a unique perspective that others may not have provided. I am a parent to 3 amazing children. My two youngest are identical twin girls who are almost 15 and have a diagnosis of autism that was diagnosed in 2007. They are on the most severe end of the Autism Spectrum or what is now called Level 3. They are non-verbal, have severe anxiety plus a host of other medical issues, but what is most devastating is the unrelenting self-injury that one of the twins inflicts upon herself.

This self-injury has landed us in the ER a few times, once after she punched herself in the face and head unrelentingly, so much so that her eyes were swollen shut and her ear swelled with blood requiring an emergency procedure and a visit from the Psychiatrist. A car ride is distressing to her, but I am lucky in that I live in an area with access to numerous mental health professionals nearby that can help us navigate these issues.

I have access to mental health providers that are there to see us quickly if needed, or call if we need to change one of the numerous medications we have trialed, or help us work through the side effects of the medications. I cannot even imagine if I lived in a county that had no mental health provider to help us when we were in a crisis. I cannot even fathom driving in a car for 1-2 hours or more just for access to a mental health provider. I have spoken to other families in this situation and it is distressing and sometimes dangerous.

I am also a Physician Assistant that has been practicing within the inpatient hospital setting for over 20 years. Our patients are admitted to the hospital for a medical issue, but many of these problems are as a direct result of some sort of mental health crisis. In our ICU and medical wards, we frequently care for patients that have attempted suicide, had drug overdoses, substance abuse problems, and various other mental health crises.

Where I work, at the University of Michigan, some patients are admitted repeatedly for the same issue. We have teams of medical providers to care for not only their medical issues, but psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, physician assistants, nurse practitioners and resident physicians in training to help manage their mental health needs while hospitalized. In this capacity Physician Assistants are defined in the Public Health Code and restraints are allowed to protect the patient and the staff. A plan is put in place and when they are discharged from the hospital one of the keys to success is close outpatient follow-up for both their medical and mental health needs. This close follow-up in turn reduces admissions.

We have patients that come to University of Michigan from all over the state including the upper peninsula and many rural areas of the lower peninsula. Many of these counties have no psychiatrist available and some have neither a psychiatrist nor psychologist. Access to mental health services is a huge barrier for these patients. There is not only the burden of finding a provider that would take them on as a patient, but the cost and time involved in traveling to these providers in other counties. Some of these patients cannot even leave their homes due to various health conditions.

By supporting SB 826 to update the mental health code by including physician assistants and APRNs, you are in turn increasing the supply of providers in these communities of need. Parents like me and my patients would be more willing to seek the care they need. Improving collaboration between mental health providers and medical providers is in the best interest of the patients. This would also reduce the burden of patient load on the psychiatrists that are practicing in the surrounding communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences.

Sincerely,

Heather Collins MS, PA-C