



GUEST OPINION

Guest Column: Ariz. behavioral-health board shows signs of dysfunction, requires review

9 HOURS AGO • EMILY JENKINS AND RICHARD POPPY SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

In Arizona, our guiding philosophy is we are a small-government state that is a land of opportunity. We strive for common-sense rules that don't burden professionals with over-regulation, and we welcome the skills and talents of newcomers from other states.

That may very well be true in most respects. However, you may not agree if you are one of the thousands of licensed professional counselors and social workers who work with people suffering from a mental illness or who provide marriage, family or substance abuse counseling.

These hard-working and highly valuable professionals are licensed and regulated by the Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners.

For several years there have been disturbing signs that this board is dysfunctional. The complaints include unfair and arbitrary reciprocal licensing standards for counselors moving in from out of state, confusing and inconsistent educational standards to obtain licensing, and heavy-handed disciplinary investigations with little or no due process for those accused.

Here are a few of many documented examples:

- A substance abuse counselor moved from Washington to Arizona. Highly qualified, she had 11 years of experience and served as a technical adviser to her former state's licensing board. Yet she was in limbo for 15 months before the board even informed her that she needed supervised hours to obtain an Arizona license. Then, under the board's arbitrary rules, none of the four supervisors she approached were deemed qualified.
- Another substance abuse and mental health counselor, a 1980 graduate of the University of Arizona, was licensed in New Mexico before moving back to Tucson. She attempted to complete her supervisory hours to be licensed here, but the board refused both licenses. It wanted the signature of a professor who oversaw her practicum at the UA decades earlier. That professor had died. Even a letter from the UA dean of education couldn't persuade the board to grant the license, or a subsequent appeal.
- A Harvard-educated chemical-dependency counselor with 26 years of experience moved to Arizona and attempted to get a reciprocal license. The board denied her request, stating that she did not prove her work was in chemical dependency despite documentation. While waiting for her appeal she was diagnosed with cancer and left the state for treatment. The board refused her request to delay her hearing while she was in treatment. The board heard the case in her absence and without reviewing her evidence. Unable to

work here, the woman now lives and works in Massachusetts.

On Tuesday, when the Legislature's Sunset Review Committee considers whether to renew the board for another 10 years, we hope it will take a deeper look at how the board functions and if it's fulfilling its mission.

If the committee truly looks beyond the surface, we expect it will renew the board for only three years and not the full 10, in order to untangle this out-of-control bureaucracy.

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