

# Voices: Protect mental health care in Texas

January 5, 2017

It's just past New Year, and the Texas Legislature may be hamstringing mental health professionals, and in turn, Texans when the legislative session convenes this spring.



John WhittenAs a Texas Baptist pastor, I understand the value of mental health care and know the challenge of finding good mental health care for members of our congregation and community. I frequently hear success stories in our congregation and around our community of the impact of our mental health professionals.

Spouses reach common understandings. Children process complex emotions. People who are depressed begin to see glimmers of hope. The grieving experience comfort. Individuals with addictions move toward recovery. And those with suicidal thoughts safely process their hurts and discover love and purpose for their life.

Mental health care professionals are on the front line of our Christian pro-life ethic, which desires all humans to flourish fully to their God-given potential. Mental health care is essential for the well-being of our state.

## **Significant threats**

Unfortunately, Texas continues to rank at the bottom for mental health care services. And without many Texans' awareness, the Texas Legislature could deal Texans a huge setback when it comes to mental health care. Current agendas would lead to a decrease in quality and access for Texan's mental health.

The Texas Legislature's Sunset Commission is looking to dissolve the boards of the state's licensed professional counselors and its licensed marriage and family therapists, as well as social workers, and turn them over to the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation.

This state agency—TDLR—is not equipped to handle the oversight of this many licensed professionals. This change negatively would affect the quality of mental health care in the state. As it stands right now, marriage and family therapists are trained through thousands of hours of coursework and internships. Only a professional board has the knowledge and experience to establish a reasonable, appropriate and rigorous licensing standard and to enforce ethical standards that protect the public. We do not need to change this.

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## **More bureaucracy**

Additionally, works are in process that would require licensed marriage and family therapists to be under the supervision of a licensed medical physician. It is widely understood other mental health professionals—licensed professional counselors—would be next. What this would mean is that a person seeking mental health first would be required to see a physician for a referral to see a mental health care provider. The patient then would continue to see a physician for periodic updates on progress.

Many physicians are not set up to deal with an influx of patients this policy would bring. Physicians are tremendous at practicing medicine but are not trained like family therapists and counselors in mental health and therapy.

Also, this would drive up health care costs as Texans would be forced to add another step to get mental health care. This provides an unnecessary profit point off the backs of hard-working Texans for their mental health care.

### **What you can do**

Here is what you can do to ensure the mental health care of Texans is not further impeded:

First, call your state legislator and members of the State Sunset Commission and let them hear your voice. Let them know you are for mental health care for the state and do not want to see the independent boards of counselors and therapists transferred to the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation. Instead, the Sunset Commission should accept the proposal of mental health professionals to improve the functioning of their boards by creating the Texas Department of Mental Health Professionals, whereby mental health professionals can regulate themselves in the most cost efficient and responsible manner. (To contact members of the Sunset Commission, [click here](#).)

Second, let them know you support the rights of family therapists to continue to diagnose their clients for billing purposes. Failure to do so would decrease Texans' access to health care and drive up their costs.

Will 2017 find the Texas Legislature supportive of mental health care? I sure hope so.

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