

ISSUE BRIEF

Protecting Social Workers and Health Professionals from Workplace Violence Act of 2019 (S. 2880/H.R. 5138)

BACKGROUND

Tragic incidences of violence against social workers and health professionals in the workplace are increasing. Between 2011-2013, there were 23,000 workplace assaults, and nearly 75% of these were in healthcare and social service settings.¹ In 2018, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that health and social service workers were nearly five times as likely to suffer a serious workplace violence injury than workers in other sectors.² Social workers and health care professionals provide essential mental health and health services to individuals and groups in a wide variety of settings such as hospitals, home care agencies, child welfare departments, community-based clinics, and schools. Social workers face unique vulnerabilities at work, as they typically provide services outside the four walls of an office, such as in client homes and community-based settings.

Far too many social workers and health professionals have lost their lives to workplace violence. The alarming statistics do not capture the substantial number of unreported assaults, which, according to one survey, are as high as 85% of all assaults.³ A 2004 national study by the National Association of Social Workers of 10,000 licensed social workers found that 44% of the respondents reported facing personal safety issues in their primary employment setting and 30% felt that their employers did not adequately address safety issues.⁴

Addressing this growing epidemic of workplace violence is a key success factor in reducing provider burnout and increasing retention. Promoting workplace safety is also critical to ensuring a sufficient mental health and health workforce. This issue is especially acute in the many geographic areas where there is a severe shortage of qualified mental health providers or health providers. As our nation strives to build a skilled workforce to meet client and patient needs in shortage areas, promoting workplace safety will go a long way in attracting social workers and health care professionals to be a part of this workforce. Finally, preventing workplace violence is also essential in providing a healing environment for clients. When clients witness violence in these settings, it can set back treatment months, if not years.

POLICY SOLUTION

The bipartisan *Protecting Social Workers and Health Professionals from Workplace Violence Act of 2019 (S. 2880/H.R. 5138)*, will promote safer working conditions by establishing a grant program within the Department of Health and Human Services to fund the implementation of workplace safety measures. The grants may be used by States, Indian Tribes, Tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations to deploy safety equipment (such as security cameras and GPS locators), make facility improvements, implement safety training programs, and provide support services for professionals who have been victims of violence. The bill provides \$10,000,000 per year, to be awarded over 5 years.

This legislation was introduced by Senator Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) – who is also a social worker – and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), as well as Representatives, Julia Brownley (D-CA-26) and Elise Stefanik (R-NY-21).

¹ Occupational Safety and Health Administration, US Department of Labor. (2016). *Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Healthcare and Social Service Workers*. Retrieved from www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3148.pdf

² Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, Social Workers*. Retrieved from www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm (visited January 03, 2020).

³ American Federation of Government Employees. (2016). *Violence Against Health & Social Service Workers*. Retrieved from www.afge.org/article/violence-against-health-care-social-service-workers-must-end/

⁴ Whitaker, T., Weismiller, T., & Clark, E. (2006). *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce: Executive summary*. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers. Retrieved from www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=ESTCCZA4HAE%3d&portalid=0

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