DATE

Senator Wiener,
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for SB 964 (Wiener) – Behavioral Health Workforce Revitalization Act

Dear Senator Wiener:

[NAME OF ORGANIZATION] supports Senate Bill 964 by Senator Scott Wiener to address the immediate behavioral health workforce crisis and develops solutions that build a sustainable and equitable behavioral health workforce. SB 964 does this by:

- Establishing a Behavioral Health Workforce Preservation and Restoration Fund;
- Creating a stipend program for students in Master of Social Work programs with a specialized focus on public behavioral health;
- Creating an online job board where licensed providers in California may post job openings for behavioral health workers;
- Expanding access to culturally competent care by making peer support specialists a statewide Medi-Cal benefit (versus an opt-in benefit) and establishing a statewide certifying body to certify peers;
- Amending the existing Medicaid Graduate Medical Education Code to add behavioral health providers to the list of those eligible under the program;
- Developing accelerated social work programs with new coursework focused on behavioral health to get new and better trained social workers into the field quickly;
- Creating new career ladders for peers and community health workers by developing an accelerated program from certification, to associates, bachelors, and masters programs;
- Requiring a study of California's behavioral health licensing requirements to eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic barriers to well-trained and talented workers from entering the field and working at the top of their scope;
- Requiring a comprehensive landscape analysis of the behavioral health workforce so that long-term policy changes and investments are rooted in California's actual workforce needs.

Just one-third of Californians who live with a mental illness receive the care they need. One of the largest drivers of this failure is a shortage of behavioral healthcare workers. Today, 31 counties with a "high need" for mental health services report having a workforce shortage.

With healthcare workers resigning in droves and mental health needs skyrocketing both as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the behavioral health workforce shortage has gone from challenge to crisis. Without essential workers to provide care, people with mild symptoms are falling into severe mental illness. Many Californians working in the behavioral health field are unaware of available employment opportunities. But the staff shortage goes deeper.

We are also failing to provide MSW students with incentives to enter the behavioral health work field. Financial incentives for MSW students have proven effective in increasing behavioral workforce participation, as many may find it financially difficult to balance course work with required number of hours of field education practicum experience.

For example, between 2005-2006 and 2018-2019, the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Stipend Program provided specialized training and stipend support to 2,373 students at 22 MSW programs across California. Of these students, 91.6% of MHSA graduates surveyed continued their employment in California's public behavioral health system beyond their completion of the MHSA service obligation. And of those surveyed, 61.7% of MHSA trainees identified as people of color, including 33.1% who were Latinx and 62.0% were able to provide services in languages other than English.

Additionally, California has not yet implemented commonsense reforms that would increase the numbers of peer support specialists. Studies demonstrate that the use of peer support specialists in a comprehensive mental health or substance use disorder treatment program helps to reduce client hospitalizations, improve client functioning, increase client satisfaction, alleviate depression and other symptoms, increase participation in treatment, reduce homelessness and increase tenure in the community, and diversify the mental health workforce. By implementing a peer support program, Pierce County, Washington reduced involuntary hospitalizations by 32% in a single year.

Those in our rural, linguistically and ethnically diverse, and LGBTQ+ communities are severely underserved when it comes to mental health; and our most vulnerable suffering from severe mental illness continue to cycle between hospital emergency rooms, jails and city streets. The state's strained mental health system is on the verge of collapse without enough behavioral health care workers. In addition, California's traditionally underserved communities face additional discrimination due to a lack of access to care.

A revitalized, diversified and expanded workforce is critical to ensuring all Californians get the care they need. For these reasons, [ORGANIZATION] support SB 964 as it will increase access to critical mental health care with holistic solutions to rebuild the workforce. Please do not hesitate to contact me at [CONTACT INFO] if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

NAME
TITLE