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## **Philipsburg weighs social worker issue**

*Lori Falce For the CDT*

PHILIPSBURG — Is a social worker someone who does a particular job, or someone trained to do that job? And how important is that name? Those were question legislators, nursing home administrators and social workers were trying to answer Thursday in Philipsburg.

The state House of Representatives Professional Licensure Committee convened a public hearing at Windy Hill Village nursing home, seeking input on House Bill 987, legislation that would exempt nursing homes from Act 68, a measure put in place last year that demanded anyone designated as a social worker in Pennsylvania have a bachelor's or master's degree in social work.

However, state and federal regulations that govern nursing homes allow them to hire people to do those jobs with a social work degree, or any of many social services degrees like psychology or sociology.

Megan Patrick, administrator of Ridgeview ElderCare in Curwensville, has tried to hire social workers for her 131-bed facility. The last time she advertised for an open position, she says only one person with a social work degree applied. Her home is currently staffed by someone with an alternative social services degree. Any nursing home with more than 120 beds is required to have someone performing social services functions.

However, social workers have two issues with this. First, they think trained social workers are the best people to act as social workers. Second, they don't want people who aren't trained social workers to be working under that name.

"You wouldn't want someone working as a nurse if they weren't trained as a nurse," said Jenna Menhart, executive director of the National Association of Social Workers.

Amy Sagen, a nursing home social worker, butted heads with a past employer who wanted her to focus on "getting heads in the beds," ignoring established protocols to approve and admit patients who weren't appropriate for nursing home care. She testified that filling the census needs of the building was taking a front seat to the needs of both a prospective resident and those already in the building when she was directed to approve a schizophrenic patient's transfer from a mental facility.

"My training allowed (me) to ethically stand up," she said. "This is a profession, not just a position."

The social workers pressed for alternative naming for the positions, like social services worker, case manager or social work designee, names that have been used in other states where similar laws are in place. Menhart stressed the law does not specify that others could not provide the services, and cited calls to both state and federal agencies that said they would be OK with a revision and would not penalize a nursing home for

employing a “social services worker” rather than a social worker, as outlined in the regulations. “Use case managers,” she said. “There’s no need to take our profession’s title.”

But nursing homes, which are subject to annual review by both state and federal surveyors, are skittish about following the laws exactly as written. Black marks on a survey, some indicated, are almost impossible to erase, even if they stem from misinterpretation of a rule by the surveyor.

In the end, the committee came to realize that more research on the issue is needed, including possible redrafting to including grandfathering of current nursing home employees. There are also two bills pending in state senate that could have an impact. One would require mandatory licensure of social workers, with grandfathering of current employees who do not have social work degrees. The other would create voluntary licensure under the designation “human services worker.”

The committee was struck by one fact as they visited Centre County for the hearings: the discovery that Penn State does not offer a degree in social work.

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