



**Testimony of Lynn Linde, Ed. D., Senior Director of the Center for Counseling Practice, Research, and Policy at the American Counseling Association (ACA) and Past President of the ACA to the District of Columbia City Council Committee on Health**  
**October 28, 2015**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today and express the support of the American Counseling Association for B21-168. The American Counseling Association represents over 56,000 licensed professional counselors (there are approximately 1,100 licensed professional counselors in the District), and it is the nation's largest professional association representing professional counselors. As a professional association, and as counselors, we have an ethical obligation to engage in legislative advocacy, particularly on proposals that relate to the mental health of our country's citizens.

Today, we join in the efforts to offer support for the "LGBTQ Cultural Competency Continuing Education Amendment Act of 2015". The American Counseling Association is committed to upholding the best practices in the mental health care field and outlined in our Code of Ethics - the ethical code for the profession of counseling – is the need to ensure we are nondiscriminatory in our practices (section C.5.) In fact, in regards to acknowledging the role of multicultural issues and diversity in assessment, our Code of Ethics outlines the understanding that counselor's use assessment technology with caution on diverse populations because it has been "normed on populations other than that of the client" (section E. 8). The Code of Ethics also acknowledges the historical and social prejudices rooted in diagnosing mental health disorders and thus requires counselors to, "strive to become aware of and address such biases in themselves and others" (section E.5.c.).

From the perspective of a mental health clinician, it is important to remain informed of the most recent best practices for providing mental health care to LGBTQ clients. There are unique mental health challenges that the LGTBQ population often struggle with, including depression and an increased rate of self-harm and risky behavior. As a provider of services, I know that myself and other counselors, will be better equipped to help the LGBTQ population deal with these unique issues if we are mandated to engage in continuing education over this subject matter. In the mental health field, it may take as many as 12 sessions for a person to truly commit to the therapeutic process. Any underlying attitudes or lack of knowledge on the behalf of the counselor in any of these initial sessions may discourage a client who is in need of care from continuing therapy. We also know, that even one negative experience in the health care setting can further prevent an individual from seeking treatment and that extends across the health care spectrum.

In my previous position, I supervised counseling interns in schools. Over the past few years I found that in each of my internship classes, at least one of the students was working with a child or adolescent who was dealing with transgender issues.. The counselors in those settings talked about how they felt inadequately prepared to provide appropriate assistance and support.

When providers have a greater understanding of how to best serve LGBTQ populations and become aware of, what may be, unintentional attitudes or the use of a communication style that may hinder the ability to form trusting and open relationships, the patients stand to benefit. This bill does not increase the continuing education burden upon health professionals, but recognizes the importance of LGBTQ cultural competency training to ensure that LGBTQ people are able to receive the care they need. ACA, represents the counseling profession, and also understands that it is in the best interest of counselor's without discrimination and in a way that fosters the potential to meet their long term health care needs.

ACA has entered into a partnership with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) to develop learning modules to raise the level of awareness, knowledge and skills of practicing counselors when working with LGBT clients. Between three and five modules will be developed and made available to the entire membership to increase counselors practice and engagement with LGBT youth. We understand this population is particularly vulnerable in schools and needs support and assistance from counselors to successfully complete their education and transition to postsecondary opportunities.

ACA is resolute in our support of B21-168. To refer back to ACA's Code of Ethics, counselors also commit themselves to continuing their own education in the field, including remaining "informed regarding best practices for working with diverse populations" (C.2.f). This statute codifies into law, the long held principles of the counseling profession. The LGBTQ population is a unique population and it is in our interest to remain educated and aware regarding the best practices for engaging this population. Whether conscious or not, societal norms and expectations influence the provision of care and training is necessary for overcoming these limitations and bettering our providers, and the care of patients. By passing this bill, the District of Columbia will ensure that all mental health care practitioners are subject to cultural sensitivity training that can reap long term benefits in regards to assisting the LGBTQ population with their health needs.

Thank you for affording me the opportunity and time to speak. I reiterate the American Counseling Association's support for B21-168 and am happy to answer any questions that you may have.