



News Release

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New Mexico Governor Signs HB-0178, Opening Doors of Opportunity for Students Seeking Substance Abuse Counseling Licensure

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham on Wednesday signed HB-0178, legislation that amends the Counseling and Therapy Practice Act and updates the type of degrees required for students seeking licensure as a Licensed Substance Abuse Associate (LSAA).

The bill, introduced by NM District 5 Rep. D. Wonda Johnson (D-McKinley and San Juan Counties), removes a major counseling and therapy licensure barrier for students who complete an Associate of Arts (AA) degree in Human Services and successfully completed required substance abuse courses.

“This bill will open the doors of opportunity and a meaningful career pathway for not only students attending UNM-Gallup Branch but institutions offering an AA degree in human services that offer substance abuse courses and related field in counseling in New Mexico,” Rep. Johnson said.

Dr. Sylvia Andrew, Professor Emeritus at UNM-Gallup, said, “Today marks the end of a long journey that began in 2017 when I learned students completing their AA in Human Services with the required substance abuse courses were denied licensure as a Licensed Substance Abuse Associate (LSAA) because they did not have a ‘counseling-related degree’ and would need to provide evidence of successfully completing additional coursework. The NM Counseling and Therapy Practice Board defined “counseling related degrees” that included “Human and Family Studies.”

“The problem was that NONE of the 19 NM colleges and universities that offered two-year associate degrees offered a degree in ‘Human Studies.’ Of the 19 two-year institutions, six offered an AA in Human Services. Still, because this degree was not among the listed ‘counseling-related degrees,’ their applications were denied and required applicants to document additional coursework. Students ultimately prevailed, but the process was onerous and time-consuming,” Dr. Andrew said.

In 2019, Dr. Andrew joined Dr. Bob Phillips, Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell, Professor Jennifer Cady from Central New Mexico in Albuquerque, NM, and Professor Jean Ellis-Sankari from UNM-Taos to find a solution. They determined the language in the Counseling and Therapy Practice Act needed to be amended to include “Human Services” as a counseling-related degree.

They found a strong advocate in Rep. Johnson, who introduced HB 235: Relating to Professional Licensure, during the 2019 regular session. The bill passed the House bipartisanly and the Senate committees. However, it did not make the Senate Floor call on the final day of the Regular Session 2019.

Rep. Johnson said, “Students continued to express dire concern after having to take the time, long-distance travel, and effort to apply for an appeal to receive their Licensed Substance Abuse Associate (LSAA) credential professional entry licensure. As we continued to hear more testimony from our students, it was apparent; this was an injustice for the students, who were denied their credentials and had to reapply. The appeal process took a long time because the board only met four times a year.”

Rep. Johnson pointed out that there is a shortage in the New Mexico Behavioral Health Workforce in general. Also, there is an urgent need for providers to meet the public health emergencies of the opioid epidemic, the pervasive problems of addiction in New Mexico, and now the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

“Just as COVID-19 has devastated our families and communities, there is now a need for counseling and therapy to get through the extraordinary time of the pandemic challenge,” Rep. Johnson said. “During these difficult times, there is a greater need for counseling and therapy; this entry-level credential will provide students in the counseling field that are very marketable in the workforce. We have RMCHCS Wellspring Recovery Center, Four Corners Recovery in McKinley County, and many other opportunities that lie ahead for our students.”

Tyrone Kay remembers when he first sought LSAA licensure after attaining an Associate degree in Human Services from UNM-Gallup. “I submitted my paperwork and found out I was short,” Mr. Kay said. The New Mexico Counseling and Therapy Board required him to take an additional class before approving his application. In 2019, he decided to help other students pursuing a career in counseling and joined the effort to amend the Counseling and Therapy Practice Act.

“It was motivating talking to the representatives to push the bill so future students could get approval to work in McKinley County and the State of New Mexico,” Mr. Kay said. He focused on “clearing the path and moving the mountain” to get the law changed.

Since that time, Mr. Kay earned a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Dependency (Addiction) with a Psychology minor. He is currently working on a Master’s degree in Mental Health and is also a member of the National Association for Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors (NAADAC). He provides contract work to McKinley and Cibola counties while he works on his graduate program.

Mr. Kay said he enjoys doing contract work as a screening counselor with the McKinley and Cibola counties while working on his graduate program. He encouraged others seeking a degree in counseling to “have fun and enjoy the process and continue to be humble.”

Rose Graham, Navajo Scholarship office director, said changes to New Mexico’s laws regarding LSAA licensure are welcome. “The need for counselors throughout the Navajo Nation is great. It’s been a real struggle for students to get through the licensure process.”

The Navajo Nation currently funds 87 students, including five graduate students, seeking counseling-related degrees at the University of New Mexico, UNM- Gallup Branch, Central New Mexico, New Mexico Highlands University, and Eastern New Mexico University.

Ms. Graham said it took a great deal of teamwork to ensure HB-0178 gained passage. She thanked Rep. Johnson, Dr. Andrew, Dr. Phillips, Professors Cady and Ellis-Sankari, and Policy Advisor Daryl Begay, Policy Advisor, for their work

“We had a great team led by Daryl Begay. He navigated the New Mexico legislative process on our behalf,” Ms. Graham said. “We most likely would not have been successful without his help.”