Dear Speaker Bolger:

On behalf of the American Counseling Association (ACA), I am writing to ask you to express our strong opposition to Michigan Senate Bill 975, which is under consideration by the Michigan House of Representatives. ACA is the nation’s largest non-profit membership organization representing the counseling profession. Although framed as a bill protecting the religious liberty of health care insurers, facilities, and providers, the legislation only accomplishes this by explicitly enabling discrimination against health care consumers on the basis of religion.

Nationwide there are more than 120,000 licensed professional counselors (LPCs), including more than 5,000 LPCs in Michigan. LPCs are master’s level mental health professionals, authorized to diagnose and treat mental, emotional, and substance abuse disorders. Like other mental health professionals, LPCs work in a variety of settings, including private practice, group practices, government agencies, managed care organizations, hospitals, community mental health clinics, and others.

Like members of other mental health professions, licensed professional counselors provide outpatient psychotherapy. ACA strongly supports religious liberty and freedom of expression. However, a fundamental tenet of counseling is that within the context of the counseling relationship, the needs of the client come first. Put simply, counseling is about the client, not the counselor. After the counseling session is over, the counselor is free to practice her or his personal religion however desired. ACA’s Code of Ethics—considered the industry standard in the field of counseling—states that “[t]he primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and to promote the welfare of clients” (Section A.1.a.).

“Respecting the client” absolutely requires that counselors not engage in discrimination on the basis of religion. Section C.5 of the ACA Code of Ethics states that:

Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status/partnership, language preference, socioeconomic status, or any basis proscribed by law. Counselors do not discriminate against clients, students, employees, supervisees, or research participants in a manner that has a negative impact on these persons.
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This simple, foundational concept—that counseling is a professional health service to and for the client, and thus necessarily tailored to the client and her/his beliefs—is expanded upon in Section A.4.b. of the Code, which states:

Counselors are aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and avoid imposing values that are inconsistent with counseling goals. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants.

Michigan has joined all other states in the Union in establishing licensure standards for professional counselors because the incompetent or unethical provision of mental health services can significantly harm the public. Individuals seek counseling because they need help. It is clearly harmful to a person in need of psychological support and care to hear, from the licensed professional they are turning to for help, that their problems and values aren’t worth discussing because they are personally objectionable to the therapist.

Please vote against SB 975, as it would take the extraordinary step of explicitly allowing discrimination on the basis of religion against consumers of mental health services.

Sincerely,

Bradley Erford, Ph.D.  
President  
American Counseling Association

cc: Michigan House of Representatives