



TZEDEK DC

Legal Help for People in Debt

**Public Hearing on Bill 25-55, “Pathways to Behavioral Health Degrees Act of 2023”
Before the Committee of the Whole
July 12, 2023**

Good morning, Chairperson Mendelson and members and staff of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Bill 25-55, the Pathways to Behavioral Health Degrees Act of 2023. I am Melissa Millar, Policy Director for Tzedek DC. Headquartered at UDC, Tzedek DC’s mission is to safeguard the legal rights and financial health of DC residents with low incomes dealing with the often-devastating consequences of abusive debt collection practices and other consumer-related issues. We carry out our mission with the goal of addressing racial gaps in wealth and equity and offer direct legal and financial counseling services at no cost to DC residents within 400% of federal poverty guidelines.

Bill 25-55 would:

- Support the University of the District of Columbia to establish a Master of Social Work degree pathway and
- To establish a scholarship program for District residents and employees who are seeking higher education in behavioral health.

We support expanding opportunities for social workers and behavioral health providers in the District. There is consistent need for social workers and their services, whether to assist persons experiencing homelessness move into housing, assist a new mother attain benefits, or attend to a crisis mental health response call. Creating an accredited master’s degree program at UDC accepted by the District’s Boards of Social Work and Professional Counseling will help increase the availability of District-based providers and potentially the pool of professionals with lived experience that may be mirrored by residents seeking services in the community.

Further, the bill seeks to establish a Behavioral Health and Human Services Scholarship Program to provide financial assistance to individuals who have Bachelors’ degrees and seek to obtain an accredited master’s degree *and* become licensed in a behavioral health or human services occupation to work in District local education agencies, government agencies, or health care provider organizations. The proposed financial assistance would include tuition at UDC; academic costs, such as the cost of books and supplies; and a monthly stipend for living expenses and transportation. The bill also contemplates covering the fees associated with obtaining a license for a behavioral health occupation in the District.

We greatly support the scholarship program, particularly as it would provide additional funding for a monthly support stipend for living and travel expenses. Many current and former students

are crushed by their student loan debts; creating a program to support the education of new providers without saddling them with potentially tens of thousands of dollars in educational debt is a thoughtful way to address both the professional needs the District has as well as the personal needs of those providing the much-needed services the District and its residents require.

However, we do want to note a lingering issue.

At Tzedek DC, we have been seeking to reform the Clean Hands law as it is applied to people seeking to access work and business opportunities. For example, each of the District's Health Professional Boards have different application and documentation processes, but by law, DC Code § 47-2862 prohibits the issuance of any licenses or permits by the District government if the applicant, among other things, owes the District more than \$100 in past due taxes or more than \$100 in outstanding fines, penalties or interest. This application of the District's Clean Hands law to health occupational licensing specifically prevents people with debt of over \$100 from being able to practice in the District. In recent weeks, the District has stopped applying the Clean Hands law to the obtaining and renewal of driver's licenses, a change that will have a positive impact on Tzedek DC's clients and tens of thousands of other District residents, enabling them to once again have access to vehicles to take them to jobs, take their children to day care and school, and live fuller lives. Yet Tzedek DC has other clients who continue to be prevented from becoming licensed in the District in occupations, including health occupations, due solely to debts owed to DC government.

We recommend that the Committee consider revising the Clean Hands law (D.C. Code § 47-2861 *et seq*) to prevent the disqualification experienced by our clients and likely countless other qualified District residents. The District is the only jurisdiction in the greater-DC region to automatically disqualify individuals from obtaining occupational and small business licenses due to small, unpaid debts like unpaid parking and traffic related debt, and as a result, our resident practitioners are providing services to Marylanders and Virginians, and *not* District residents. We support the bill before the Committee today but fear that existing DC law could yet prevent graduates from this well-intentioned program from becoming licensed if they owe more than \$100 to the District government. In addition to the proposals being discussed in this bill today, we believe that eliminating the Clean Hands prohibition on licensing our health professionals is also key to supporting District residents' health and District providers' financial security.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.