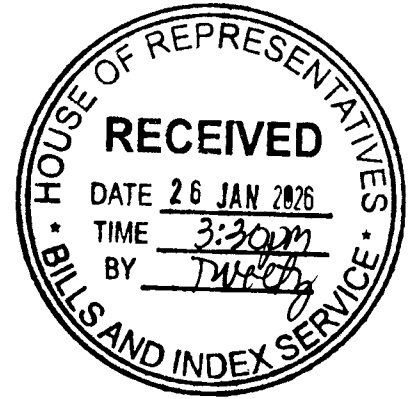


Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL No. 7315



Introduced by REP. RAMIL L. HERNANDEZ

AN ACT
STRENGTHENING THE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES OF STATE UNIVERSITIES AND
COLLEGES AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR

EXPLANATORY NOTE

The mental health of our youth is a pressing national concern. The World Health Organization has reported a rising prevalence of mental health conditions among young people, and the Philippines is no exception. Students in state universities and colleges (SUCs) face immense pressure from academic demands, social expectations, and personal challenges, often without adequate support. While the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion Act was a significant step forward, it left a critical gap by focusing solely on basic education, neglecting the mental health needs of students and personnel in the higher education sector, especially for students as they transition to college life, challenged by increased academic rigor and the complexities of adulthood; these can exacerbate existing mental health issues or trigger new ones.

This proposed "SUCs Mental Health Service Act" directly addresses this gap by extending a similar, but more tailored, mental health support system to our SUCs. It builds upon the foundational principles of the Basic Education Act and the comprehensive Mental Health Act (R.A. No. 11036), aiming to create a supportive and responsive environment for the entire SUC community—students, faculty, and staff.

The central provisions of this bill include:

- **Mandatory Establishment of Mental Health Offices:** The bill requires all SUCs to establish a dedicated Mental Health Office on each campus. This office will serve as the central hub for all mental health services, ensuring that support is not just available, but also visible and accessible to everyone on campus.
- **Hiring and Deployment of Qualified Professionals:** Recognizing the need for expert care, the act mandates the hiring and deployment of a sufficient number of mental health professionals, including licensed psychologists and guidance counselors, to man these offices. It also allows for the hiring of psychology

graduates to assist under the supervision of qualified professionals, addressing potential shortages while providing a pathway for new practitioners.

- **Standardized Career and Compensation Framework:** To attract and retain top talent, the bill mandates a uniform career and personnel development plan for mental health professionals in SUCs. It sets a minimum entry-level salary grade of 16 and aligns the qualifications and standards with the Philippine Qualifications Framework. This provision ensures that SUCs can offer competitive compensation and professional growth opportunities, which are essential for building a robust mental health workforce.
- **Comprehensive Mental Health Programs:** The Mental Health Offices are tasked with designing and implementing a wide range of programs. These include 24/7 campus hotlines for immediate assistance, heightened awareness campaigns on suicide prevention and stress management, and continuous training for mental health service personnel to keep them updated on the latest psycho-social approaches.
- **Institutional Linkages and Support:** The bill requires the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to coordinate with other government agencies, such as the Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), to maximize existing resources and services. This collaborative approach ensures a holistic and integrated system of care.

In essence, this proposed law is a logical and necessary extension of our national commitment to mental health. By enacting the "SUCs Mental Health Service Act," we will empower our SUCs to become centers of not only academic excellence but also holistic well-being. This will not only improve the academic performance and personal resilience of our students but also foster a healthier, more productive, and more compassionate community for all. The well-being of our students is an investment in the future of our nation, and this bill provides the institutional framework to secure that investment.

This proposed legislation is approved by the House on third reading in December 2022 and transmitted to the Senate in the same year; however, not enacted into law. Thus, the author seeks approval of this bill.

Approved,

RAMIL L. HERNANDEZ
2nd District, Laguna

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Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled.

Section 1. *Short Title.* – This Act shall be known as the “*State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) Mental Health Service Act*”.

Section 2. *Declaration of Policy.* – It is hereby declared the policy of the State to uphold the basic right of every Filipino to sound mental health and ensure access to appropriate interventions, therapy, and treatment as needed. Pursuant to this mandate, the State shall institute policies to promote the mental health and wellness of students, faculty, teaching and non-teaching staff, and other personnel in the campuses of SUCs through, among others, the establishment of a Mental Health Office in all SUCs, and the hiring, deployment, and training of additional SUCs-based mental health service personnel.

All SUCs shall ensure that proper and adequate mental health services are provided to their students, faculty, non-teaching staff and other personnel. In this regard, all SUCs, through their Mental Health Offices, shall design programs and provide services that shall assist students in resolving emotional, behavioral, and psychosocial issues that are barriers to learning and enhance the preparedness of the faculty, teaching, non-teaching staff, and other personnel to foster an enabling environment for students to acquire knowledge and to develop intellectually.

Section 3. *Definition of Terms.* – As used in this Act:

- (a) *Guidance counselor* refers to an individual who possesses a license or certification granted by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) and holds at the minimum a master’s degree in Guidance and Counseling, Guidance, or Counseling, without prejudice to those registered under the grandfather’s clause of Republic Act No. 9258, otherwise known as the “Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004”, and is competent to perform

guidance and counseling, career guidance and implement mental health programs;

- (b) *Mental health* refers to a state of well-being in which the individual realizes one's own abilities and potentials, copes adequately with the normal stresses of life, displays resilience in the face of extreme life events, works productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a positive contribution to the community;
- (c) *Mental health professional* refers to a medical doctor, nurse, guidance counselor, psychologist, or any other appropriately-trained and qualified person with specific skills relevant to, and necessary for, the provision of mental health services;
- (d) *Mental health services* refer to the psychosocial, psychiatric, or neurologic activities and programs along the whole range of the mental health support services including promotion, prevention, treatment, and aftercare, which are provided by mental health facilities and mental health professionals;
- (e) *Psychologist* refers to a natural person who has professional training and clinical skills in psychotherapeutic intervention and assessment for mental health problems and possesses a license or certification granted by the PRC and holds at the minimum a master's degree in Psychology without prejudice to those granted licenses under the grandfather's clause of Republic Act No. 10029, otherwise known as the "Philippine Psychology Act of 2009";
- (f) *SUCs-based mental health service personnel* refers to any mental health professional who is hired or deployed by, or has a contract with an SUC to render mental health services in its campus.

Section 4. Establishment of Mental Health Offices in All SUCs Campuses. – The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) shall, subject to the rules and regulations of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) and the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), and the policies, standards, and guidelines of the CHED, require all SUCs to establish a Mental Health Office in all their campuses.

The Mental Health Offices shall set up campus hotlines with dedicated and trained guidance counselors to provide assistance to the whole SUC Community, especially the students. Special attention shall be given to those identified to have mental health problems or conditions, especially those at risk of committing suicide.

The CHED and the SUCs, through their Mental Health Offices, shall initiate and sustain a heightened campaign to raise the collective consciousness about mental health. The awareness campaign shall give special emphasis to the issues of suicide prevention, stress handling, mental health and nutrition, and guidance and counseling. The campaign shall ensure that the whole SUC community, especially the students, is aware of in-campus mental health services.

The SUCs, through the Mental Health Offices, shall implement mental health programs and projects designed to promote the mental health and well-being of faculty, students, and personnel alike.

Each Mental Health Office shall be manned by trained mental health professionals who shall serve as the mental health service personnel of the SUCs.

The SUCs-based mental health service personnel of the Mental Health Offices, including those who shall be hired upon the effectivity of this Act, shall create a mechanism for timely crisis intervention and suicide prevention and the appropriate response strategies for the whole SUCs community, especially the students.

The CHED shall, in coordination with the SUCs, establish mechanisms to maximize existing services offered by other executive departments such as the attached agencies to the Department of Health (DOH) dealing with mental health and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

Section 5. *Hiring, Training and Deployment of Mental Health Professionals.* – Subject to the guidelines set by the CHED and the SUCs, CSC and DBM, the SUCs shall hire, train and deploy mental health professionals, including a psychologist, to the Mental Health Office to ensure that each SUC shall have mental health professionals or mental health service providers within five (5) years from the effectivity of this Act.

The SUCs shall, in coordination with the CHED, prepare the appropriate plantilla positions to be submitted to the DBM for evaluation and approval for the additional SUC-based mental health service personnel to be hired under this Act, subject to the existing organizational, staffing, position classification and compensation policies, rules, and regulations.

Notwithstanding the provisions of Republic Act No. 9258, otherwise known as the “Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004”, SUCs may hire, as may be necessary, college graduates who do not yet qualify as mental health professionals but who possess a background in psychology or similar fields to provide mental health services: *Provided*, That the CHED shall provide for the appropriate training and instruction of such college graduates in order for them to gain and develop the necessary skills to render counselling services to faculty, students and school personnel, and assist them in managing mental health issues: *Provided, further*, That such services shall be rendered under the supervision of qualified mental health professionals within the schools division: *Provided, finally*, That a college graduate hired to work in a Mental Health Office shall, within three (3) years from the date of employment in the SUC, secure the appropriate license to practice as a mental health professional and meet the relevant qualification requirements of their position.

The CHED and the SUCs, through the Mental Health Offices, shall formulate a scheme for the continuous training of mental health service personnel, taking into consideration the latest scientific studies, psycho-social approaches and know-how on mental health and mental health services, in accordance with the provisions of Republic Act No. 10912, otherwise known as the “Continuing Professional Development Act of 2016”.

Section 6. Professional and Career Development of Mental Health Professionals. – The CHED shall, in coordination with the DBM, CSC, DOH and the PRC:

- a) Prepare a uniform career and personnel development plan that shall include provisions on personal wellness, merit promotion, performance evaluation, in-service training, graduate scholarships, research grants, and incentive award system;
- b) Match the salary grades of mental health professionals with related plantilla items under the provisions of Republic Act No. 6758, otherwise known as the “Compensation and Position Classification Act of 1989,” as amended;
- c) Align the qualifications and standards for the qualification outcomes of Mental Health Professionals to the provisions of Republic Act No. 10968, otherwise known as the “Philippine Qualifications Framework Act”;
- d) Revisit the organizational structure of the SUCs to provide competent and professional personnel who shall provide supervision and technical assistance to the guidance counselors;
- e) Review, revise and develop the duties and responsibilities of mental health professionals in accordance with laws governing their professions;
- f) Prepare a performance evaluation plan that considers the improvement of the efficiency and organizational effectiveness of each counselor: *Provided*, That each employee shall be informed regularly by their immediate supervisor of the evaluation of their performance; and
- g) Provide periodic training, aimed at retooling and upgrading the skills of mental health professionals.

Section 7. Salary Grade. – The career and salary scales of mental health professionals in SUCs shall provide for a gradual progression from a minimum to a maximum salary by means of regular increments, to be given regularly based on merit and competencies.

The entry level of mental health professionals shall not be lower than Salary Grade 16. Mental health professionals hired by SUCs as Psychometricians shall be hired at Salary Grade 11 at the entry level.

Section 8. Contractual Hiring of Mental Health Personnel. – In case of a scarcity of mental health professionals who are available to work on a full-time basis in a Mental Health Office, the concerned SUC may hire qualified professionals on a contractual or part-time basis, subject to the evaluation and approval of the DBM.

Section 9. Benefits. – All mental health professionals employed in the various Mental Health Offices shall enjoy the rights, privileges, and other benefits provided in Republic Act No. 7305, otherwise known as the “Magna Carta of Public Health Workers”,

Republic Act No. 11036, otherwise known as the “Mental Health Act”, and other pertinent laws.

Section 10. Appropriations. – The amount necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act shall be included in the Annual General Appropriations Act.

Section 11. Implementing Rules and Regulations. - Within sixty (60) days from the effectivity of this Act, the CHED shall, in coordination with the DOH, the Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges, and other concerned stakeholders, issue rules and regulations to govern the hiring, training and deployment of guidance counselors, psychologists and other mental health service personnel in SUCs, and for the implementation of this Act.

Section 12. Suppletory Application. – The applicable provisions of Republic Act No. 11036, otherwise known as the “Mental Health Act”, insofar as they are not inconsistent with the provisions of this Act, shall apply suppletorily.

Section 13. Separability Clause. – If any provision of this Act is declared unconstitutional, the remainder of this Act or any provision not affected, shall remain in full force and effect.

Section 14. Repealing Clause. – Any law, presidential decree or issuance, executive order, letter of instruction, administrative order, rule or regulation contrary to or inconsistent with the provisions of this Act is repealed, modified or amended accordingly.

Section 15. Effectivity. – This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the *Official Gazette* or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,