

Good afternoon! For the record, Dr. Thomas Felke, Legislative Liaison for the Southwest Unit of the National Association of Social Workers – Florida Chapter.

I am here today to ask for both your continued and, much needed, added support in passing the Social Work Licensure Compact during the 2026 FL Legislative Session.

During the 2025 FL legislative session, the Compact passed the House of Representatives with unanimous support. For that, we are extremely grateful to Representatives Botana, Benarroch, & Melo as well as the wider House. Unfortunately, the Compact has stalled in the first Senate committee, each of the past two legislative sessions, and therefore was not brought before Senators for consideration. Our hope for the upcoming session is that the Compact will again receive the same support in the House and see a similar path in the Senate, leading to its passage.

The Compact has already been passed in 31 states across the country, and legislation is pending in 5 other states. Notably, FL is the only state in the southeastern United States that has not passed the Compact.

The need for the Compact cannot be overstated, particularly right here in Collier County. Collier County matches or exceeds both the State and National averages of reported poor mental health days, frequent mental distress, feelings of loneliness, and suicide. This is partly due to Collier County having a resident to mental health provider ratio of 810:1, which greatly exceeds the state average of 460 mental health providers for every one Floridian. The national average is 300:1.

Social workers are the largest providers of mental health services in the nation. Passing the Compact will increase access to quality mental health care, alleviate the existing mental health provider shortage, and attract skilled social workers to our state. The compact has support from major organizations in FL including the association of oncology social workers, the FL renal society, and the Behavioral Workforce Institute at the University of South Florida.

Florida cannot afford to fall even farther behind in the provision of quality mental health care to its residents.

As not only a legislative liaison, but also as a social worker and social work professor at FGCU, I again ask for your continued support to pass the Social Work Licensure Compact during the 2026 FL Legislative Session. Thank you!