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## **Action Plan on Licensing Backlog Affecting the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners**

*The Council recognizes this transition plan is a dynamic "living" document and that some corrective measures may need to be added or changed after adoption by the Council. The Council adopts this plan with the full understanding of the foregoing and authorizes agency staff to update the plan as needed.*

**Background and Scope of Plan.** In response to the backlog of applications pending before the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners, the Council directed the Executive Director at its June 16, 2020 regular meeting to coordinate with HHSC PLCU staff to develop a plan to address these backlogs. The Council directed that the plan specifically address three areas of concern related to the backlog. These areas consist of:

1. Development and planning for revisions to the licensing process that will prevent or reduce the likelihood of future backlogs;
2. Development and implementation of a plan to eliminate the existing backlog in the licensing process; and
3. Development of a plan for ensuring continued timely licensing operations under current executive orders, as well as any reasonably foreseeable future amendments or expansion of those orders.

**Significant Factors Contributing to Backlog.** Following discussions between the Executive Director and HHSC PLCU staff, agency staff have identified factors that have played a significant role in causing the backlog as follow:

1. The PLCU has suffered significant staff attrition and is currently staffed at only 50% capacity;
2. The impact of COVID-19 has affected virtually all aspects of Board and HHSC operations. By way of example, PLCU staff were not issued laptops until mid to late June, and even then, there were significant limitations on the ability to access the regulatory database due to intra-agency limitations on HHSC issued computers accessing a DSHS database system;
3. Significant health issues within the PLCU staff ranks (separate and apart from COVID-19) that resulted in staff being absent from work for longer periods of time than normal, thereby reducing productivity;
4. The involvement of different PLCU staff in the handling and processing of an application which leads to delays and sometimes lost paperwork since the application and supporting materials are often transferred between staff members;

5. A problem with the version of the regulatory database utilized by the PLCU has reduced licensing efficiency for social work applicants in particular. More specifically, the database does not reflect when clinical supervision plans have been approved, leading to confusion and subsequent delays when applicants and supervisors provide incorrect dates on application and supervision forms;
6. Until recently, PLCU staff access to the PLCU office was limited by both executive orders and HHSC policy. Coupled with heavy reliance upon in-office paper-based processing and review of application materials, resulting access barrier has proven problematic;
7. Seasonal spike in applicants graduating in May increased numbers of applications requiring processing;
8. Exam testing centers delayed testing during initial COVID-19 outbreak but have since begun testing again; and
9. Administratively burdensome eligibility or procedural requirements set forth in current board rules or application materials, e.g., the requirement to seek approval of supervision plans, requirement for three personal references.

**Action Item No. 1: Revisions to licensing process to prevent or reduce likelihood of future backlogs.**

1. The Council will employ greater utilization of online services to reduce time-consuming manual processing of paperwork. By way of example, the Council has mandated online renewals, expanded online self-help features for licensees (e.g., change of address, ordering duplicate renewal permits, converting to inactive status), and has begun discussions with ASWB about handling some aspects of the application process through ASWB's licensing portal. Additionally, the Council will encourage online applicants to upload their application materials through the online licensing system, rather than submitting those materials by email or regular mail.
2. Applications and supporting materials will be scanned into the system for use by staff, rather than continuing to rely upon hard copies of materials. This should greatly expand staff's ability to process application materials remotely and reduce the likelihood for lost or misplaced paperwork.
3. Once the *esprit de corps* necessary for team-building is established within this new agency, the Executive Director intends to take full advantage of the ability for staff to telecommute in order to reduce turnover and ensure continued productivity, even in times where working from the office is impossible or inadvisable. To assure offsite productivity, Council staff will be issued laptops capable of remotely logging into the Council's regulatory database and file servers.
4. To eliminate the need to transfer applications between various staff members and reduce the likelihood for delay and lost paperwork, applications received by the Council will be sorted by type and directed to individual staff members tasked with reviewing and processing only those types of applications. This system should also result in greater continuity and customer service to applicants who will be linked to a singular and consistent point of contact for their application and questions that may follow.
5. The Council will employ cross-training of all staff to ensure the greatest extent of coverage for staff positions in the event of an absence or vacancy.
6. The Executive Director and PLCU staff intend to examine and bring several suggested rule changes before the Board to continue to reduce the administrative burden on both the applicant and agency staff in terms of submitting and processing applications.

**Action Item No. 2: Develop and implement a plan to eliminate the existing backlog in the licensing process.**

The following steps have been taken by HHSC to address the backlog:

1. HHSC has authorized weekend overtime for PLCU staff through August 31st;

2. HHSC has authorized the use of temporary employees to supplement and assist PLCU staff;
3. HHSC has issued laptops to PLCU staff; and
4. The PLCU is permitting staff to voluntarily return to work more frequently than the current rotating basis. *While the shortage of staff has made social distancing within the office easier, some staff remain reluctant to return to the office.*

It is important to remember that regulatory authority over the practice of social work does not transfer to the Council until September 1st. As a result, the Council's plan to eliminate the backlog is necessarily prospective in nature, beginning on September 1st.

The following steps have been initiated or will be taken by the Council to address the backlog:

1. Applications pending before the Council on September 1st will be sorted by type and directed to individual staff members tasked with reviewing and processing only those types of applications. This system should also result in greater continuity and customer service to applicants who will be linked to singular and consistent point of contact for their application and questions that may follow.
2. The Executive Director has begun discussions with ASWB about handling some aspects of the application process through ASWB's licensing portal. Such an outsourcing has the potential to allow the Council to operate more efficiently and cost-effective, yet must be researched within the context of the GAA and other applicable state law.
3. Should none of the foregoing options operate to reduce the backlog, the Council may temporarily reassign staff to address the backlog and bring the social work application numbers in line with the other boards.

**Action Item No. 3: Develop a plan for ensuring continued timely licensing operations under current executive orders, as well as any reasonably foreseeable future amendments or expansion of those orders.**

1. Once the esprit de corps necessary for team-building is established within this new agency, the Executive Director intends to take full advantage of the ability for staff to telecommute in order to reduce turnover and ensure continued productivity, even in times where working from the office is impossible or inadvisable. To assure offsite productivity, Council staff will be issued laptops capable of remotely logging into the Council's regulatory database and file servers.
2. The Council will employ greater utilization of online services to reduce the time-consuming need for physical processing of paperwork. By way of example, the Council will encourage online applicants to upload their application materials through the online licensing system, rather than submitting those materials by email or regular mail. ***NOTE: Licensees should anticipate greater incorporation of online or cloud-based systems into the Council's regulatory framework in order to achieve greater efficiency as operations mature.*** Additionally, once the agency is fully functioning after September 1st, the Council should begin exploring the expanded use of its online licensing capabilities, as well as advanced online licensing systems offered by third-parties, to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of licensing operations.
3. Applications received by the Council will be sorted by type and directed to individual staff members tasked with reviewing and processing only those types of applications. This system should also result in greater continuity and customer service to applicants who will be linked to singular and consistent point of contact for their application and questions that may follow.