

NASW WI: Statement on redistricting

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NASW WI TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO ASSEMBLY BILLS 624 AND 625 AND SENATE BILL 621 AND 622 ON THURSDAY OCTOBER 28, 2021 BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON STATE AFFAIRS AND THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, LEGAL REVIEW AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

Chairpersons Stroebel and Swearingen:

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Wisconsin Chapter I am speaking in opposition to Assembly Bills 624 and 625 and Senate Bills 621 and 622.

As a lobbyist for NASW WI for 29 years, I work “across the aisle” on behalf of policies that support our profession and clients. Although I respect different perspectives and value orientations of legislators, what has bothered me over the years is that on a number of issues, I have had multiple experiences with legislators who tell me privately that they support our position but publicly are unable to do so. The major causes of this situation appear to be 1) the influence of special interest groups with money and a loud and angry base of supporters and 2) the fear that they will be “primaried” if they take a principled position that may anger some of members of their political party in their district. Because the districts are so gerrymandered, even if a majority of their constituents support a position, they only need to worry about what the political base in their party is concerned about. If the legislative districts were less gerrymandered and more “purplish” the legislators could feel free to vote their conscience as they would need to respond to independent and swing voters to win re-election.

I can give you several examples of this dynamic. In the 2006 election, Democrats took back 8 of the 11 legislative seats they needed to win a majority and could be seen as “breathing down the necks” of the Republican majority. During the 2007-2008 legislative session a bill was introduced to require hospitals to provide victims of rape the morning after pill. While this bill was very popular statewide there was strong opposition from portion of the base of the majority party at that time and the Speaker sent the bill to a committee whose chair did not support the bill. However the lead Republican author of the bill, who was passionate about the need for the bill, pointedly told his colleagues, many who were in swing districts, that if they did not allow this bill a vote, they could lose the next election because the issue was popular. The bill did pass the State Legislature despite opposition from a part of the base of the party.

On the other hand I have worked on issues such as a social work safety bill, the Child Victim’s Act, banning conversion therapy, and the Extreme Risk Protection Order, where some members of the majority party have initially told me they supported the bill and in a few cases had agreed to be the lead sponsor. However after pushback from special interest groups and because of fear of being “primaried”, I have seen these legislators back away from a bill they supported and not even sign on as a co-sponsor on the bill.

I strongly believe districts that are more balanced and created by an impartial body would result in legislators being more able to vote their conscience and work on a bi-partisan basis to problem solve state issues. I also believe more balanced districts could also result in public policy that more

accurately reflected the will of a majority of Wisconsin residents. As examples, polls have shown consistently that a majority of Wisconsin residents favor policies such as medical marijuana, accepting federal monies to expand Medicaid to serve the working poor, or closing the loopholes on background checks for the purchase of guns, but these bills can’t even get a public hearing or vote.

As a lobbyist for 29 years I have met wonderful legislators from both sides of the aisle who want to make a difference for the future of Wisconsin. I truly believe most legislators would welcome a redistricting system that give them more space to vote their conscience and work on a bi-partisan basis to address challenges facing our state.

Please vote no on AB 624 and 625 and SB 621 and 622 and instead support Senate Bill 389 and Assembly Bill 395 so that our legislative districts can be drawn in an impartial manner.

I am happy to take questions.

Marc Herstand, MSW CISW

Executive Director

National Association of Social Workers, Wisconsin Chapter