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## Opinion: Licensing dietitians and nutritionists could make advice more expensive

Conor Norris and Edward Timmons

Bathing suit season in Michigan is right around the corner. But for those seeking nutrition advice to get ready, a new bill in the Legislature could make that advice more expensive and harder to find.

SB 614 is being considered by Michigan lawmakers. It would require those offering diet or nutrition advice to first obtain a license. For those without a license, offering that advice would be illegal.



To qualify for licensure, a dietitian would need to pay a \$95 application fee, pass a licensing exam and earn a bachelor's degree. A nutritionist would have to jump through many more hoops, including a master's or doctorate degree and 1,000 hours of supervised

practice. The purpose of this law is to ensure that dietitians and nutritionists

are skilled and offer high-quality advice that helps clients improve their health. Nutrition advice is more important than ever, as obesity and related chronic health conditions continue to increase. It's a laudable goal, but occupational licensing is the wrong way to achieve it.

In a 2012 report by the Office of Regulatory Reinvention, reviewers found no evidence that licensing laws had any safety benefits for clients or improvements in public health.

Acting on their recommendation, Michigan removed licensing requirements for nutritionists and dietitians in 2014. This reform made common sense — more than half of U.S. states do not require licensing for nutritionists and dietitians. Additionally, there is little evidence that licensing laws improve health for people in the state, or prevent professionals from giving bad advice.

For those who study the effects of occupational licensing, this doesn't come as a surprise. Research consistently fails to find evidence that licensing laws improve the quality of services.

That's not to say that occupational licensing has no impact; it does.

Unfortunately, the effect is overwhelmingly negative. Forcing aspiring professionals to meet rigid requirements creates barriers to entry, reducing the number of professionals in certain industries. Not only does this make it harder for consumers to find services, but it also increases the prices that they pay.

SB 614 would also put Michigan at a disadvantage compared to its neighbors. Both Indiana and Wisconsin would have far less stringent rules in place for nutritionists and dietitians. They protect the title of nutritionist and dietitian, allowing anyone to offer services, but only those who are accredited to call themselves "Registered Nutritionists."

Protecting the use of title does not place the same burden on consumers as licensing.

The design of SB 614 is particularly worrisome. It is far more aggressive than any other state's law, defining the advice that is regulated more widely. Anyone who offers advice about weight, diet or wellness would be subjected to these regulations in certain circumstances.

As an example, a fitness instructor or health coach could legally provide diet advice to a client without a license, unless they had a medical condition. In that case, they would need a licensed professional to sign off on that advice, even if it was exactly the same.

Additionally, complying with the new regulations could make offering nutrition advice to underserved communities at YMCAs or community centers prohibitively difficult, worsening public health.

Almost a decade ago, Michigan emerged as a national leader in removing unnecessary red tape for workers and ensuring that consumers had access to lower cost services. SB 614 would likely reduce the number of dietitians and nutritionists, making it harder for people to receive health advice. Worse yet, it likely won't have an impact on the quality of advice they receive.

Michigan was right to remove licensure in 2014. The state should not take a giant step backwards by reinstating it now.

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