

HJR 0053 — Protecting Professional Degree Status for Health & Human Services Graduate Programs

Illinois House Joint Resolution — 104th General Assembly

⚠️ Federal Action Threatening Illinois' Health & Human Services Workforce

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 eliminated the Graduate PLUS loan program and imposed new loan caps. On January 30, 2026, the U.S. Department of Education published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) defining only 11 degree programs as 'professional' — a list that includes medicine, law, and dentistry but excludes social work, nursing, counseling, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, public health, and education. The public comment period closed March 2, 2026. A final rule is expected in spring 2026 and would take effect July 1, 2026. No final rule has been issued as of Advocacy Day, making this a critical window for Illinois to go on record.

What HJR 0053 Does

House Joint Resolution 0053 is Illinois' formal legislative response to federal overreach in defining which graduate degrees count as 'professional.' The resolution:

- Formally declares that the General Assembly recognizes social work, nursing, counseling, therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, audiology, physician assistant practice, public health, and education as professional disciplines requiring advanced graduate education and rigorous licensure
- Lists specifically the graduate degrees Illinois considers professional — including MSW, DSW, MSN, DNP, LCPC/LPC/LMFT degrees, DPT, MOT, MS-SLP, AuD, MPH, DrPH, and education master's programs
- Directs all state agencies, public universities, and state-funded entities to avoid discriminating against holders of these degrees in hiring, promotion, or compensation based on any federal loan classification
- Urges the U.S. Department of Education to expand its 'professional degree' definition to include all affected fields
- Urges Illinois' Congressional delegation to advocate for legislation restoring adequate federal loan access for graduate health and human services students
- Commits the General Assembly to exploring state-level solutions including scholarships, grants, and loan repayment assistance programs

Understanding the Federal Threat

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed July 4, 2025, made sweeping changes to federal graduate student lending. Beginning July 1, 2026:

- The Graduate PLUS program — which allowed students to borrow up to the full cost of attendance — is eliminated for new borrowers
- Graduate students in 'non-professional' programs will be capped at \$20,500 per year in federal unsubsidized loans, with a \$100,000 lifetime limit
- Students in 'professional' programs (medicine, law, dentistry, and 8 others) may borrow up to \$50,000 per year with a \$200,000 lifetime limit
- Social work, nursing, counseling, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, public health, and education are NOT on the 'professional' list as proposed

What does the gap mean in real dollars?

MSW programs in Illinois range from approximately \$20,000 to \$104,000 in total tuition. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, in-state tuition alone runs \$22,720 for a two-year program — before living expenses, books, or fees. A \$20,500 annual cap falls short of the actual cost of attendance at virtually every Illinois MSW program, forcing students to choose between private high-interest loans, forgoing the degree, or dropping out.

Who Is Affected in Illinois

Illinois licenses tens of thousands of professionals across the affected fields. Every one of those licenses requires a graduate degree that would fall under the lower loan limits:

74,000

Annual job openings projected for social workers nationally over the next decade — a profession already facing critical shortages (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, cited in HJR 0053)

295,800

Registered nurse shortage projected nationwide as of 2025, with deficits continuing through 2037 (HRSA, cited in HJR 0053)

75-85%

Proportion of students and practitioners in affected fields who are women — this policy disproportionately impacts women (HJR 0053; NASFAA)

80%+

Social workers are 80% women; OT 89%; speech-language pathology 96%; nursing 87-99% — overwhelmingly female-dominated professions losing federal support (NASFAA)

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CSWE-accredited MSW programs operating in Illinois, producing the licensed social workers that staff our hospitals, schools, child welfare system, and mental health clinics

The impact falls hardest on first-generation college students, low-income students, and students from underrepresented communities — the same students who are most likely to return to underserved communities to practice. Restricting loan access does not just hurt students; it guarantees a thinner, less diverse pipeline into the professions that serve Illinois' most vulnerable residents.

Illinois Already Recognizes These as Professional Degrees

Illinois law does not treat social work, nursing, or counseling as academic credentials. The state requires professional licensure for these practitioners under statutes including:

- Clinical Social Work and Social Work Practice Act (225 ILCS 20/) — requiring the MSW for LCSW and most LSW licenses.
- Nurse Practice Act (225 ILCS 65/) — requiring advanced nursing degrees for APRN practice
- Professional Counselor and Clinical Professional Counselor Licensing and Practice Act (225 ILCS 107/) — requiring master's degrees for LCPC/LPC licensure
- Illinois Marriage and Family Therapy Licensing Act (225 ILCS 55/) — requiring graduate-level degrees for LMFT licensure
- Illinois Physical Therapy Act (225 ILCS 90/) and Illinois Occupational Therapy Practice Act (225 ILCS 75/)

The federal government is proposing to call 'academic' the same degrees that Illinois law calls the minimum requirement for professional licensure. **That contradiction is precisely what HJR 0053 pushes back against.**

A Social Work Perspective

For NASW-Illinois, this issue is deeply personal. The MSW is not an academic credential. It is a clinical, field-intensive professional degree that requires supervised practice hours, comprehensive examinations, and adherence to a professional code of ethics, before a student ever applies for licensure.

The proposed federal rule does not just affect loan limits. It sends a policy signal that social work, counseling, and nursing are less valuable than law or medicine. At a moment when Illinois is fighting a mental health workforce crisis, a child welfare staffing crisis, and widespread shortages in healthcare and allied health, that signal could not be more wrong, or more damaging.

NASW-Illinois urges every member of the General Assembly to support HJR 0053 — not just as a statement of professional respect, but as a concrete step toward protecting Illinois' capacity to meet the needs of its residents.

Ask Your Legislator to Support HJR 0053

When you meet with your legislator during Advocacy Day:

- Co-sponsor and vote YES on HJR 0053
- Recognize that Illinois law already treats these as professional degrees — the federal government should too
- Urge them to call on Illinois' Congressional delegation to fight for full professional status restoration

Sources

One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 (Public Law 119-21, H.R. 1). Signed July 4, 2025.

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NASFAA: Making Sense of the Student Loan Changes from OBBBA's RISE Committee. nasfaa.org

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NASW Social Work Blog: Department of Education Professional Reclassification Hurts Social Workers, December 2025. socialworkblog.org

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U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: Social Worker employment projections (cited in HJR 0053).

HRSA: Nursing workforce shortage projections through 2037 (cited in HJR 0053).