December 9, 2013

The Honorable Stephen M. Sweeney
President, New Jersey Senate
State House
P.O. Box 099
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0099

Dear Senator Sweeney:

I am writing on behalf of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the medical specialty society representing more than 35,000 psychiatric physicians in New Jersey and across the country, to urge you to oppose Senate Bill 137.

S-137 would compromise patient safety by allowing psychologists, who are trained in behavioral and social sciences, to prescribe psychotropic medicine without medical education and training and without medical supervision.

Specifically, S-137 would:

- Permit psychologists to prescribe powerful psychotropic drugs after only 400 hours of didactic education.
- Allow the training required for certain psychologists to receive prescribing privileges to be approved by the State Board of Psychological Examiners (whose members also have no medical background) rather than the State Board of Medical Examiners.
- Permit prescribing psychologists to issue medications after contacting a patient’s physician, however it does not list specific requirements as to what should occur during this contact, nor does it stipulate what happens when a patient’s psychologist and physician disagree.

New Jersey patients will be at risk if psychologists are allowed to prescribe psychotropic medications as described above. Over fifty percent of the patients seen for mental health disorders have other medical conditions. Psychiatrists spend 12 or more years of medical education and residency training preparing them to diagnose and treat mental illness. Yet, S-137 does not require training sufficient to perform a psychiatric assessment, which generally includes ordering and interpreting test results, and/or prescribing psychotropic medications. Psychiatric evaluations include a review of all body systems and permits diagnosis of medical conditions which can masquerade as psychiatric symptoms. Further, medical review and diagnosis are essential to catching potentially disabling and deadly side-effects if these powerful medications are improperly prescribed; S-137 does not require the medical education and training necessary to assess and treat such conditions and the patient as a whole.
Both the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Psychologists Opposed to Prescription Privileges for Psychologists (POPPPs) have come out against legislation that expands prescribing privileges to psychologists. NAMI states in their *Resolution on prescribing by psychologists and workforce issues* “NAMI does not currently endorse proposals before state legislatures to expand prescribing privileges to psychologists.” POPPPs recommends the creation of programs that encourage collaboration between psychologists and New Jersey’s current prescribing medical professionals in order to increase access to all of the state’s mental health patients.

On behalf of the psychiatrists of New Jersey and the patients they treat, the APA opposes S-137. The APA respectfully urges your non-support in order to safeguard and uphold the health of all of New Jersey’s citizens suffering from mental disorders.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns. If you have any questions regarding these comments, please do not hesitate to contact Janice Brannon, Deputy Director, State Affairs at jbrannon@psych.org.

Sincerely,

Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A.
C.E.O. and Medical Director
American Psychiatric Association

cc: The Honorable Ronald L. Rice
Deb Wilson, NJPA