

Licensing Complementary and Alternative Therapies: Massachusetts' Six-Year Effort

by Susan Mitchell, Rita Glassman and Pamela Miles

In 2022, the states of Massachusetts, Oregon, Vermont, and some local municipalities across the US, introduced or passed bills to regulate unlicensed complementary therapies.

These therapies have all remained unlicensed for decades because they are recognized as safe and non-invasive.

History of Licensing in Massachusetts

Massachusetts holds a unique place in this movement toward regulation. Between 2016 and 2020, the state made four unsuccessful attempts to regulate complementary practices. During the 2021-2022 legislative session, the Attorney General's (AG) office put forth a fifth bill, introduced simultaneously in the House and Senate to ensure swift passage.

The 2022 legislation suffered the same fate as the four previous bills. Following public testimony, the bill was "sent to study," because it lacked enough support in the Joint Committee on Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure to bring the bill to a vote on either the House or Senate floor.

In 2023, the 2022 bill was reintroduced.

Objectives of the Legislation

The AG's objective in 2016 and 2017 was to strengthen anti-human trafficking laws, and the bills' titles clearly reflected that intent.¹ The stated objective of the 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2023 bills was to regulate bodywork², although the AG's

¹ **2016:** S.2461, An Act to Strengthen the Anti-Human Trafficking Law; **2017:** S.905, An Act to Strengthen Laws Combatting Human Trafficking and Protecting Survivors of Modern-Day Slavery

² **2018:** S.2621, An Act to Regulate Bodywork Therapy; **2019:** An Act Regulating Bodyworks; **2021:** An Act Regulating Alternative Healing

office continued to maintain that the intent was, in fact, to combat human trafficking.

Our attorney's search of the Massachusetts' criminal database between 2006 and 2021 found no evidence linking Reiki practitioners to human trafficking in Massachusetts.

However, extensive data does implicate the massage industry in trafficking. Although massage is already licensed in the state, and has been since 2006, licensing has not led to less human trafficking. The [Polaris Report](#)³ reinforces this fact, explaining that as soon as one profession is licensed, traffickers target another that isn't, for example moving from massage to other professions like dance, photography, and modeling.

Proponents of the regulatory bills insist licensing complementary practitioners will give law enforcement a means to stop sex traffickers, but they have provided no evidence that supports their claim. In fact, none of the bills that were filed would have granted law enforcement any more rights than they already have—they must still obtain search warrants before entering and searching facilities.

Modalities Affected

The 2021 MA bills [H.350](#) and [S.221](#) targeted many specific modalities: “*bodywork*” . . . shall include, but not be limited to, *the Feldenkrais Method; Reflexology; the Trager Approach; Ayurvedic Therapies, Rolf Structural Integration, Polarity or Polarity Therapy; Polarity Therapy Bodywork; Asian Bodywork Therapy that does not constitute massage as defined in this chapter; Acupressure; Jin Shin Do; Qi Gong; Tui Na; Shiatsu; Body/Mind Centering; and Reiki.*”

The phrase “not be limited to” means the bills, if passed, could expand to include more than 100 practices that were not listed in the bills, with authority to add more in the future. In other words, there is no limit to how many practices could be licensed if the bills were passed.

Scope

³ Polaris operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline and maintains the largest human trafficking data bank in North America. Polaris provides data to researchers, academics, law enforcement and others throughout the US.

The bills called for establishing standards for the practice and teaching of each modality, standards of professional and ethical conduct, and standards for continuing education. Licensing is enacted as soon as possible after passage and excludes grandfathering⁴ under any circumstances, meaning no targeted practice would be able to escape licensing.

Opposition Strategies

Reiki practitioners and teachers led the opposition to these bills. They started a grassroots campaign mobilizing as many individuals as possible to visit and write their legislators to oppose the legislation.

Next, Boston Reiki Master Rita Glassman organized a coalition of other unlicensed practices to join the grassroots effort. Glassman developed resources, including bill summaries and fact sheets, helping the leaders of various complementary therapies educate their communities about what was happening and how it would affect their right to practice. Glassman's group also worked to expand public support to oppose the bill, so that a wide swath of MA residents and experts could effectively communicate their concerns to legislators.

While orchestrating all of that, Glassman, Reiki master Susan Mitchell and other colleagues founded Reiki Unified, a Massachusetts non-profit educational organization with the mandate to educate the public about the threat of regulation—tracking licensing legislation throughout the US, providing bill overviews, and supporting practitioners and the public with materials for protecting Reiki and other complementary practices from unnecessary control.

Standardization

Every one of the proposed bills would have created a state board to determine standards of practice and education for holistic practices, and to monitor the licensing process.

This emphasis on standardization suppresses the rich diversity of many of these complementary approaches, while adding unneeded restrictions.

Standardization is limiting: it requires adherence to a single protocol determined by a small board overseeing dozens of completely different practices. One form of

⁴ A grandfather clause exempts certain classes of people (e.g. volunteers, international teachers, community elders) from the requirements of a piece of legislation affecting their previous rights, privileges, or practices.

practice cannot address or protect the many styles of Reiki teachers and students. These variations are a hallmark of traditional folk practices.

As a folk practice, Reiki is an example of a complementary tradition that particularly suffers from standardization. Like many folk practices, Reiki is intended to be practiced by anyone to benefit themselves, friends, and family. Most Reiki students and practitioners experience Reiki as a spiritual practice that develops with daily self-practice.

Some form of practice protocol is common among students and practitioners, but that form varies among the myriad Reiki traditions. The form provides a means for experiencing the essence of the practice.

As home practitioners move into professional and healthcare settings, it's imperative to maintain Reiki's roots as a folk practice in order to preserve its unique qualities and benefits. Requiring standard bio-medical education courses, part of every bill, pushes a traditional practice into a scientific, standardized framework that is not only meaningless for the practice and its practitioners, but would also damage the quality of what professionals now offer their clients and students.

Standardization, particularly as it is enforced over time, places form over personal and internal experience and intuition; it's the definition of one-size-fits-all. Standardization disallows the subjective inner development that is the essence of spiritual practice. Reiki and other practices with a spiritual component become hollow and diminished when there's no room for individual experience and customization. In short, it's not possible to standardize spiritual practice — to make it objective — because it is, by definition, individual and subjective. Imagine, for example, standardizing prayer.

Reiki practice, with its many styles and schools, also offers an opportunity. In an age of growing polarization, all communities that encourage diversity, equity and inclusion, and respect and value differences, are examples that can inspire much needed changes in our society. Standardization suppresses that rich diversity by requiring uniformity.

Effects on Teachers, Practitioners and Clients

Beyond a doubt, [economic analysis](#) shows that occupational licensing creates [difficulties](#) for the public who use complementary therapies, and for the practitioners who provide these services.

The last three presidential administrations—Obama, Trump and Biden—issued advisories warning states against the negative effects of unnecessary licensing and detailing the harm to consumers and workers.

Teachers

The Massachusetts licensing bills required that complementary practices be taught only at state sanctioned schools with curriculums that meet state determined standards. Becoming state qualified would cost a Reiki teacher upwards of \$8000 paid out at various stages in the process of certifying their courses. Fees persist with ongoing license renewals and continuing education courses.

Experienced teachers would not be able to continue teaching the curriculums they've developed, even though existing courses would likely reflect a deeper understanding of the practice than would the new standardized curriculum. Rather, even senior teachers, the elders of the grassroots community, would have to teach only content approved by a state board, if they chose to continue teaching, and were able to afford the fees.

The certification process imposes prohibitive costs for educators in these fields, forcing irreplaceable teachers out of practice, and depriving the public of their experience and wisdom. With a standardized curriculum, teachers would also be required to teach content that could be counter to their own training or their understanding of their practice. Given the diversity in the Reiki community, that would be the case for most teachers.

Practitioners and Volunteers

If practitioners cannot afford the additional educational training, certification, and licensing, legislation bans them from practicing professions in which they have already received specialized training.

Licensing adds costly hurdles to small business owners. The vast majority of these sole proprietors are women, often single mothers, supporting families and already struggling to sustain their businesses in extremely difficult economic times.

Many practitioners and students volunteer in hospice and hospital programs. According to the American Hospital Association, in 2007, there were 800 Reiki hospital volunteer programs⁵ throughout the United States. We found no data regarding paid Reiki positions in health care, but paid positions are much less common than Reiki volunteers. Mandatory licensing will lead to a shortage of volunteers in places where they are most needed, depriving countless suffering patients, family, and caregivers from their support. It is especially unnecessary given that hospitals and other medical settings internally credential their volunteers, who must adhere to strict policy and procedures.

Clients

Holistic professionals who are able to stay in business would have to pass on increased costs to clients and students, reducing the number of people who would be able to afford the support of holistic well-being practices. The number of practitioners would decline, demand would rise, and prices would increase, meaning already marginalized populations would be unable to access the care they need to support their health and well-being.

The public, volunteers, patients, practitioners, clients and teachers are all harmed by the downward spiral of limited access. Some clients and students would no longer be able to work with their chosen practitioners, the people who have been helping them, and would have to settle for someone with less experience who was able to meet the financial and legal hurdles.

What You and I Can Do

If unnecessary local or state regulation concerns you, start talking to other unlicensed colleagues in your community, educating them about the impact of regulation, and creating an informal local coalition. Introduce yourself to your legislators—you may need them.

Stay informed of bills nationwide by [subscribing](#) to Reiki Unified email updates. A volunteer team monitors legislation in all 50 states. As a subscriber, you'll know

⁵ American Hospital Association, aha.com. According to the American Hospital Association 2007 survey, 15%, or over 800 American hospitals were listing Reiki practice as part of their hospital services. Those are the latest figures available to the public. The integration of Reiki practice into conventional medical care has increased significantly over the last 15 years. Hospitals throughout the US offering Reiki services include Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, NY-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia, Johns Hopkins Hospital and Health System, California Pacific Medical Center, and Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center.

immediately when bills are introduced that affect Reiki and other practices in your state and throughout the nation.

As soon as bills are introduced, Reiki Unified mobilizes supporters to call, write and email legislative committees and representatives to explain the harmful impacts of legislation. The Reiki Unified website provides useful organizing tips and templates, as well as bill overviews and links.

You can add your name or business to the Reiki Unified [Supporters](#) page and share your values.

Protecting Reiki and other complementary practices from unnecessary licensing, enables all of us to access the care we want from the practitioners we choose.