

New Jersey Needs to License Dietitians/Nutritionists

By Denise Langevin, M.S., R.D.
President, New Jersey Dietetic Association

Did you know that at the present time anyone in the state of New Jersey has the right to call themselves a “nutritionist” regardless of their education and/or training? New Jersey is one of only four remaining states in the US that does not regulate individuals who provide nutrition services. Licensure would define the professional recognized to provide these services. Every state regulates occupations and professions that have an impact on the public's health and safety, so why not dietitians/nutritionists? It is vital that the public understands which individuals have appropriate training and experience to provide nutrition services. State recognition will protect the public by setting the standards for providing safe, reliable nutrition advice and counseling. Granting licensure for dietitians/nutritionists will assure that persons in New Jersey who call themselves a dietitian or nutritionist meet prescribed standards of education and experience, have passed an examination, and agree to uphold identified ethical and professional standards of competence in nutrition practice.

Licensure laws protect the public by identifying qualifications needed to practice. They do not monopolize any business or impinge upon personal freedoms. The same arguments opposing licensure laws could be used against licensure of physicians, nurses and many other healthcare professionals but legislatures in every state have recognized that the protection of the public health justifies regulation.

Physicians often recommend that their patients consult with a “nutritionist”. Both physicians and consumers need to know that these providers have the appropriate education and training to offer sound nutrition advice and are legally recognized. Currently, the public must evaluate the background, “credentials”, titles, and credibility of a nutrition practitioner, causing confusion. Licensure will assure the establishment of requirements and oversight of the use of titles by the state, thus reducing confusion. This bill provides consumers with important assurances about the education and training of those who provide nutrition services and will allow consumers to have confidence in the choices they make when seeking nutritional advice.

There are allowances in The Dietitian/Nutritionist Licensing Act that will permit “any person who does not hold himself out to be a dietitian/nutritionist” to furnish nutritional information or to provide explanations as to the use of food or food products including dietary supplements. The bill will not in any way impede businesses that sell health foods, health products, and dietary supplements or provide weight loss. The health food industry has not been affected by similar legislation enacted in 46 other states. Also this bill will not prevent other practitioners from performing the services for which they are trained, and in no way impinges upon the scope of practice of any other licensed health care providers. This legislation is not about espousing one philosophy or school of thought over others. It is about assuring that nutrition practitioners have the appropriate education and training to develop recommendations for consumers derived from evidence-based guidelines.

The New Jersey Dietetic Association, an affiliate of the American Dietetic Association (ADA), wholeheartedly supports the Dietitian/Nutritionist Licensing Act sponsored by Senators Joe Vitale and Robert Singer (S1941) and by Assemblyman Herb Conaway, M.D. and Assemblywoman Connie Wagner (A2933). This legislation has evolved because the public safety requires the regulation of the practice of dietetics and nutrition. New Jersey lags far behind the rest of the country on this issue and should move for passage of The Dietitian/Nutritionist Licensing Act A2933/S1941.