The Louisiana Board of Examiners for Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology (LBESPA) has presented at the annual convention of all three of the state’s professional associations (LSHA, SPALS and LAA) over the last two years in an effort to inform our professional communities regarding the activities of the Board. More specifically, there has been a concentrated push to inform and educate licensees concerning current issues the Board has been considering for the last several years. There are a multitude of significant issues impacting the Board and its mission to protect consumers. These challenges are a result of evolving academic and certification requirements and national trends in the communication professions, as well as in the overall regulatory world.

During the recent presentations at the June 2015 LSHA Convention in Lafayette, LBESPA members provided information on the activities of the Board for 2014-15. Topics discussed included number of licensees, trends in licensure categories, disciplinary actions, potential relocation of board office, updating the data base, presentations at universities and for other groups, discontinuation of LBESPA’s Spring Continuing Education Activity and discontinuation of the Board’s video library.

A second presentation at the LSHA convention, **“*Revisions of the Practice Act: Strategies for Change”,*** provided historical information concerning audiology and speech-language pathology licensure in Louisiana. Louisiana’s first Practice Act was passed in 1972 during Governor Edwards’ first term. The Practice Act has been revised twice since 1972. Those changes occurred in 1978 and 1995.

One of the most significant modifications to the Practice Act occurred in 1978. This version of the Practice Act made Louisiana one of the early exemption-free states. Virtually all practice settings required licensure as a result of the amendments put forth during the 1978 legislative session.

In 1995 a number of noteworthy changes were also enacted. First, following passage of the 1995 Practice Act audiologists are now able to dispense hearing aids under their audiology license and are no longer required to hold dual licensure as a hearing aid dealer. Second, the licensure category of Speech-Language Pathology Assistants was created in an effort to avert loss of licensure requirements for school based settings. LBESPA has twice conducted surveys regarding the utilization of speech-language pathology assistants and the data are positive. Third, a Public Member was added to the composition of the Board in an effort to add strength to the Board’s mission, consumer protection. Fourth, continuing education for licensure renewals was mandated. Finally, expanded disciplinary actions and procedures were included to provide the Board with additional and more effective tools. Prior to the 1995 revisions, the only options the Board had at its disposal following a disciplinary hearing were suspension or revocation of a license.

Each revision of the Practice Act has addressed important matters which have warranted modifications. During the time periods between the initial and subsequent revisions of the Practice Act, the Rules and Regulations required modifications to maintain currency with the practice. First, adjustments were necessary to reflect the new language and requirements in the law. Second, revisions were required as operating procedures changed. These changes were typically the result of trends and the evolving requirements and standards for entry-level professionals, including revised language to reflect passing criteria of the new Praxis in conformity with updates from Educational Testing Service. Necessary alterations to the Rules and Regulations since the 1995 revision have included coursework requirements consistent with the doctoral degree in Audiology, a Code of Ethics for SLP Assistants, provision of tele-supervision, expedited licensing process for military personnel or spouses of military personnel, and provision for emergency preparedness.

Many revisions, such as the possibility of licensing audiology assistants, the elimination of specific hearing aid dispensing requirements and the post-graduate professional experience for audiology, as well as examining clinical practicum requirements and updating scopes of practice of each profession need to be considered. In addition, governance over unlicensed practice, addition of criminal background checks for consistency with national standards, updating and expanding information concerning telepractice and resolution of potential conflicts with sections of the law and the existing language in the rules and regulations are all areas of concern that require attention.

The Board hopes to put forth a proposed bill for the 2016 legislative session but there are hurdles to address prior to finalizing this endeavor. It should be noted that opening up the Practice Act is not a pursuit without risk. Careful consideration will be given to the potential harm and gains prior to any action. Board members will continue to reach out to all stake holders as it moves forward in this process. The input, support and assistance of individual licensees and professional associations are critical to accomplishment of this task.