

Favorable support of SB871 and SB145 with suggested amendments

Dear Delegate Joseline Pena-Melnyk, Chair, Health and Government Operations Committee,

Thank you, and other members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, for your serious consideration of SB 871 and SB 145.

As a member of legislative district 11B, an Associate Professor, former Associate Dean for the Masters Program and current Masters Program Committee Chair at the University of Maryland, School of Social Work, I am writing to strongly support the passage of SB 871 and SB 145 with recommendations for amendments.

These bills are a step in the right direction to address bias in the licensing process for Maryland social workers, but I want to express my disappointment with the bills in their amended form and would recommend reinstating the originally proposed 1-year moratorium on the biased exams in SB 871 and 2-year temporary license option in SB 145.

Similar to what we have seen with SATs nationally, little evidence suggests there is a strong relationship between exam scores and performance, or in this case, competent, safe, ethical social work practice. Yet, without a moratorium on the exams, we seem to be accepting - with our eyes wide open about the significant exam pass rate disparities that have caused harm to BIPOC, non-native-English speakers, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and older MSW graduates – that: 1) even more MSW graduates from accredited MSW programs in the state will be harmed, and 2) we will exacerbate the on-going and critical shortage of licensed social workers available to serve Maryland citizens in need. This not only perpetuates bias but is short-sighted and self-defeating.

If the licensing process and the dire shortage of social workers were a patient brought to shock trauma, our first necessary step would be to stop the bleeding! We would never recommend delaying, forming a committee to study just how badly the patient is doing, and debating all alternative treatments available before acting. Only after we stop further harm, can we focus on healing the patient, which the proposed workgroup recommended in SB 871 can tackle through a thoughtful, inclusive, and transparent process in the coming year. We should not wait for that process to conclude before we act to pause the harmful exams that are currently part of the licensure process.

It is critical to the health of the State of Maryland that we equitably empower all MSW graduates to practice and apply the knowledge and skills they have already obtained in accredited, rigorous social work programs across the state. We should be thanking them for their commitment to a noble profession and growing the diversity of the social work workforce that seeks to serve the most vulnerable in Maryland, not perpetuating biased and costly barriers to their success.

Please see further details on my specific recommendations for these two bills below.

SB0871 Social Workers - Sunset Extension, Notification of Complete Application, and Workgroup on Social Worker Examination Requirements for Licensure

Reinstatement of the 1-year moratorium on all social work licensing exams. While a workgroup identifies long-term solutions, it is hurting both our social workers and our community to continue to force students to take an exam that is ineffective and demonstrated by research to be biased toward white, neurotypical, English-speaking students. Students graduating from an accredited social work program with the appropriate clinical courses should be allowed to obtain a license and practice as social workers while a more equitable solution to the current exam is researched and explored by the workgroup.

Adjust language in the workgroup, per request by the Deaf and hard of hearing community, from “a representative of Gallaudet University” to “A social worker designated by the Maryland Association of the Deaf who is familiar with the licensing process for deaf and hard of hearing social workers.” A representative from Gallaudet does not ensure that the representative is Deaf or understands the exam issue from the Deaf perspective.

SB0145 State Board of Social Work Examiners - Conditional and Temporary Licenses to Practice Social Work

Change “The BSWE may...” to “The BSWE shall...” The BSWE has historically not addressed disparities in social work licensing and opposed temporary licensing. The shift from “may” to “shall” ensures the Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) grants temporary licensure to eligible candidates.

Reinstate 2-year temporary license option for LCSW-Cs. Temporary licensure for LCSW-C is currently amended out of SB0145. Data from the ASWB indicates that the LCSW-C exam is just as biased as the LBSW and LMSW exam. It is imperative that we include LCSW-Cs as possible candidates for temporary licensure. Many are ready to advance in our field, which would immensely help the state provide access to mental health services that are so needed and are unable to do so because of the barrier of the current biased exam.

Sincerely,

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