

Michael Massey, PhD, MSW, M.Ed., Assistant Professor, Catholic University of America

Senate Bill 0145-State Board of Social Work Examiners - Conditional and Temporary Licenses to Practice Social Work

SUPPORT

I am a Professor of Social Work at Catholic University and a resident of Maryland. I am asking you to pass SB0145, which will immediately address the unnecessary harm that is being caused by the social work license exams and offer a way of finding a better path forward.

I also ask for the following amendments, the justification for which will be explained in detail below:

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. 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 but are unable to do so because of the barrier of a bias exam.

Right now, licensure exam requirements are needlessly keeping hundreds, if not thousands, of qualified and ready social workers from serving their communities. We know this because the organization who creates and administers the national exam, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), final—after a 40 years of testing—released demographic exam outcome data. The results were worse than we thought—there are huge racial and other disparities that have allowed most white social work graduates to enter the field and left many social workers of Color out in the cold. From 2011-2021, white test-takers in Maryland passed the Masters level exam at a first-time rate of 93%, while Black test-takers passed at 56% rate and Hispanic/Latinos at a 79% rate. Clinical exam pass rates are similar, with rates of 89%, 54%, and 66% respectively. These exams are machines of racial inequality.

We’ve done the math. If all exam-takers in Maryland passed at the white pass rates during 2011-2021, we would have over 1200 more licensed social workers. In 2021, Illinois passed a bill that eliminated the Masters level exam. According to the NASW-IL chapter, in the year before the law went into effect, only 421 social workers became licensed. Since then, 2600 more social workers have become licensed. The exams not only impact the lives and livelihoods of qualified social workers, they deny Maryland communities a diverse pool of social workers that can provide culturally responsive approaches and help alleviate the current mental health crisis.

You may be thinking, “Why should we lower standards just because there are outcome disparities? Doesn’t this result in unprepared and ineffective social workers?” In fact, fearmongers who oppose this bill will want you to believe this. However, this question is based on a false presumption—that licensure exam outcomes predict or are related to quality of practice. In fact, there is not a shred of evidence that such a relationship exists. In a recent white paper that examines clinical exams for Psychology, Clinical Social Work, Counseling, and Marriage and Family Counseling, Caldwell and Rousmaniere, found that “After more than 50 years of use, there remains no evidence that clinical exams in mental health care improve the quality or safety of that care.”

The National Association of Social Workers, our most prominent national professional organization, has seen the evidence and agrees that the exams are an unnecessary barrier. In a letter written in October 2022, the NASW states, **“The current exam does not conform with industry testing standards. Further, there is no evidence that the exam ensures competence or prevents misconduct or unethical practice. We cannot support exam requirements that result in unnecessary gatekeeping and discrimination.”** This could not be any clearer.

While these concerns have been voiced from the moment the exams became the national norm, ASWB has consistently withheld data and information that might have addressed them. In fact, when asked about releasing demographic outcome data in 2020, then ASWB CEO, Dwight Hymans, blatantly lied about it, claiming that “ASWB does not collect and thus does not release exam outcomes based on demographics.” Yet, magically, two years later, under immense pressure, they were able to release ten year’s worth of such data. Meanwhile, ASWB’s revenues steadily roll in—they now sit on over \$40 million in assets. **Unfortunately, the Maryland Board of Social Work Examiners is a member of ASWB and has simply parroted their unsubstantiated talking points while ignoring and being openly hostile to hundreds of Maryland social workers who have asked them to address this issue. The Board cannot be counted on to fully engage with the evidence or support social workers and communities that are being harmed by the exams. For that reason, they should not have discretion over whether the temporary licenses are issued. Rather, if an applicant qualifies, they should be granted the license. Changing the wording from “may” to “shall” will ensure that everyone is treated fairly and equally.**

With overwhelming evidence of racial and other disparities in exam performance and no evidence that exams do what they are intended to do, there is no way to continue to justify their use. Eliminating exams would not be lowering standards, it would be acknowledging the false standards that are reinforcing racial discrimination and shortchanging our communities. Even without exams, social workers have a high bar for licensure. They must graduate from an accredited school of social work, obtain thousands of hours of closely supervised practice, fulfill continuing education requirements, and get a criminal background check. Taken together, that is a more than adequate baseline of training and competence.

As a social work professor at Catholic University, I have seen excellent students graduate and immediately stagnate as they are denied jobs that they are qualified for. They put in the work and demonstrated time and again that they are ready to do the difficult and nuanced work that the job demands. Many of these students, who are mostly Black, want to go back to their own

communities and serve people with whom they share background and culture. Yet, an exam that is unsupported by evidence keeps them from doing so. And we all are lesser for it.

SB0145 is the least we can do to temporarily address this issue in a significant way. It will immediately remove the exam barrier that is harming so many people in Maryland and add to our depleted workforce. Passing SB0145 with the suggested amendments protects the public, helps Maryland, and moves us towards justice.