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Support for SB0872

I am a Professor of Social Work at Catholic University and a resident of Maryland. I am asking you to pass SB0871, 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.

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.

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.

SB0872 will immediately remove the exam barrier that is harming so many people in Maryland and add to our depleted workforce. Passing SB0872 protects the public, helps Maryland, and moves us towards justice.