

**Written Testimony from Lisa Kays, LICSW, LCSW-C, LCSW regarding SB0871 and 0872
FAVORABLE WITH THE WORKGROUP AMENDMENT**

I am writing as a licensed clinical social worker in the state of Maryland (LCSW-C) and a consumer of mental health services, particularly for my sons (age 7 and 4) in Maryland, to urge your support of the following bills recently introduced by Representative Mary Washington.

[SB0871](#)-Title: Social Workers - Licensure Examinations - Moratorium and Workgroup

[SB0872](#)-Title: State Board of Social Work Examiners - Temporary License to Practice Social Work

These bills seek to allay the harm being done by the multi-level licensure exam in my profession, which has been demonstrated to pose significant racial bias towards my colleagues of color. We are currently the only profession that requires 3 levels of exams and at each level, my colleagues of color, as well as deaf and older colleagues, pay and labor to complete degrees and then are unable to use them because the exam's bias makes it impossible for them to pass these exams. As a clinical supervisor, I have witnessed this firsthand with supervisees, whom would immediately benefit from the relief provided in these bills.

In addition to my colleagues, this exam, and the ASWB's gaslighting and abject refusal to acknowledge the harm the exam does and to rectify it, not only harm the social workers who invest in a career and then face severe financial penalty when they can't access independent licensure, but it poses significant workforce issues when patients and people served in social work agencies can't be treated and served by someone who looks like and has the same lived experience as they do.

Additionally, I have recently noticed that when I go to look for therapists of a certain modality requiring advanced skills and training, such as IFS or somatic experiencing, both evidence-based treatments providing high levels of symptom relief quite quickly to people, most all of those certified are white. While this isn't solely due to the biased exam, it speaks to a systemic issue within our profession where people of color cannot advance due to these financial, emotional and logistical barriers, and then, even if they do, are left so financially encumbered that they likely can't pay for these higher levels of training. It is highly problematic for a profession that serves so many people of color to be so white and this exam is contributing extensively to that problem.

I can also say as a licensed social worker who is white and passed all of these exams the first time that the exams are absurd. Absurd. I feel experientially and the data supports that they contribute nothing to "public safety" as the ASWB likes to tout, are extremely cut off from the actual skills, ethics and knowledge social workers need, and are an arbitrary waste of time that contribute nothing to our profession or the safety of those it serves. It is my experience as a student, supervisee, and now, supervisor, of social work that the course work and intensive supervision we receive in order to achieve clinical licensure are the factors that truly contribute

to ethical and competent practice and provide more than enough guardrails to ensure that practitioners are serving the public well. The exam is nothing but a meaningless obstacle with no bearing on competence.

You will find that many programs that help people of color "study" for the exam are literally saying to them a version of, "You just have to learn to think like a white woman" and that is the "skill" being taught openly and often that helps individuals pass. It sounds like I may be making this up, but I assure you, I am not. I have heard it repeatedly.

I have a specific supervisee who has suffered immensely under these exams, who is seeking licensure in MD. She is bi-lingual, an immigrant, and serves children, a population in dire need of clinical professionals currently. In terms of clinicians needed skills right now, she is a unicorn. I can't get my own son a therapist currently, and he's on numerous waitlists, much less a *Spanish-speaking bilingual therapist*. She has failed the exam 7 times, often by 1 point only, despite her being a very talented, skilled and highly ethical social worker. She has endured extraordinary financial hardship as a result, and faced a career setback of over a decade. She wonders if she should give up and leave the profession, and I don't blame her, or, quite frankly, counsel her otherwise. Given how few points she fails the exam by, it is impossible to not wonder if the exam questions she fails are ones ASWB later finds are biased—but yet does nothing about. She has written ASWB to ask for a remedy, and their response is basically to critique her study skills. This legislation would provide immediate relief to people in her situation, allowing them to achieve licensure and to serve people in our communities who very much need care.

I will add that I recently attended the ASWB "Community Conversations" about the exam and none of the social workers in my focus group, a sampling from across the United States, expressed any appreciation for or validity to the objectives of the exam as related to public safety. None see it as important or think it effectively screens out good or bad social workers, in any way. The consensus was that it assesses the capacity to take a standardized test—which has nothing to do with actual social work practice or skill.

I hope you will consult with many social workers and look at the workforce data in Maryland surrounding our profession, and really talk with social workers about how this exam has affected their colleagues and how they feel it serves the profession in deciding if you'll support these bills, and I hope that in the end you'll take the anti-racist action of alleviating much of the harm caused by these exams to the greatest extent possible in Maryland.

I am happy to talk further or to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,
Lisa Kays
LCSW-C

7008 Braeburn Court
Bethesda, MD 20817
202-489-6882
lisa@lisakays.com