

**Senate Finance Committee
March 10, 2023**

Senate Bill 872

State Board of Social Work Examiners – Temporary License to Practice Social Work

*****OPPOSE*****

Maryland’s Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers represents social workers across the State of Maryland. We respectfully oppose Senate Bill 872, State Board of Social Work Examiners - Temporary License to Practice Social Work.

The field of Social Work has worked hard since its inception in the early 1900s to establish itself as a profession, a struggle that continues to this day. This is despite our now being the greatest provider of behavioral health services in the country, as well as recognized for work in public child welfare, administration, social policy, hospitals, schools, community centers, mobile crisis teams, and so on.

Social work wasn’t even recognized as a profession in Maryland until 1975, when the original Social Work Statute was finally passed. Title protection for social workers was a hard-fought win, bringing social workers in line with other professions - law, psychology, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, licensed certified professional counselors, and so on - who require the education and training necessary to acquire a body of knowledge, a commitment to ethical practice, and that specifically name licensing examination as a measure of professional competency. Despite licensing requirements and title protection, however, respect for the profession is still regularly undermined by those who call people social workers who aren’t.

Entry into the field and practice longevity have historically been fraught with discrimination. Recently, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) showed alarmingly disparate outcomes based on race, age, and those for whom English is a second language. We share a sense of urgency to stop the harm. However, we believe we must proceed in a thoughtful manner that provides a quick response to the ongoing systemic bias and oppression in standardized testing but also does not do damage to the hard fought recognition as a profession, and still fragile respect.

This is why we oppose SB 872, so that we have the opportunity to thoughtfully consider the possibility of unintended harmful consequences from altering the means by which one enters the social work profession, or gains recognition as a clinical practitioner. To fully craft a response to disparity in testing measures, we respectfully ask you to hit the “pause” button and enable a rigorous and comprehensive study of the impact of the changes proposed by SB872 on the profession, and to thoughtfully propose solutions that will not result in damage.

In short, we are concerned the bill will:

- Create a two-tiered profession - those social workers licensed by testing and those with a temporary license. The disproportionality will emulate the ASWB test results, resulting in licensing via testing for a predominantly White group, and temporary licensure for a

- predominantly Black and Brown group, older students, and non-native English speakers. “Separate but equal”?
- Impose barriers that will affect the portability of our social work license when moving to another state, and damage the ability for Maryland social workers to enter into a social work compact with other states.
- Negatively affect temporary licensees’ eligibility for insurance reimbursement and ultimately, long-term and stable employment.
- Delegitimize recognition as expert witnesses, already more heavily scrutinized for Black and Brown people, those whose first language is not English, and those with diverse abilities.
- Create the public the perception that requirements are being diluted, which can create economic disenfranchisement for those who are already marginalized. What will the impact be on social workers’ ongoing battle for adequate professional salaries and compensation?

These concerns, along with many others, are sufficient to oppose SB 872. We urge the State to bring together the current examination vendor and thought leaders in social work to rigorously assess the current state of disparities in testing data, improve upon and concretize the State’s position on civil rights requirements for testing vendors and give vendors the opportunity to produce accessible and equitable testing measures, thereby, essentially holding all health occupation testing vendors to the current Maryland Social Work Act mandate that “... examinations... shall strive to be free of cultural bias.”

In summary, we believe many questions and concerns must be considered before legislative changes are made to our profession’s requirements. We instead support legislation mandating the formation of a workgroup to propose steps forward to eliminate testing bias in a comprehensive and rigorous way. We also recommend short-term steps that can be taken immediately, especially identifying public funding for repeat testing.

Providing temporary licenses and eliminating the examination as a measure of competency unintentionally creates a separate but equal measure to enter the field, one that will most harm those this bill wishes to help.

We ask for an **unfavorable report** for SB 872.

National Association of Social Workers – Maryland Chapter

Legislative Committee