

Dear Delegate Peña-Melnyk and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee,

I am writing this to request your support for **SB871** and **SB145** which are temporary measures that begin to address the harm that biased licensing exams have on talented social workers who are BIPOC, older, non-native English-speakers, and Deaf/Hard of Hearing. We have a workforce shortage and a mental health crisis, and we need more skilled social workers who reflect the communities they serve.

When the exams exclude dedicated, compassionate and talented Social Workers from moving forward in their career, the quality of life for both the Social Workers and the residents in the Maryland are significantly impacted in the following ways:

- Increase of Maryland residents with unaddressed mental health and substance abuse disorders
- Decrease of accessible preventive measures and mental health emergency services in low-income communities
- Increased 911 calls
- Overcrowded ER rooms due to an uptick of behavioral health visits for mental health crises, substance abuse and/or psychotropic medication refills which could be prevented if increased social work resources in the community were available and accessible
- Extensive waitlists for Maryland residents to gain access to community mental health services
- Increased burnout and turnover amongst existing licensed Social Workers due to understaffing, which leads to unsustainable work environments
- Disrupted service delivery/gaps in mental health services for Maryland residents due to overburdened caseloads, understaffed agencies and overworked existing licensed Social Workers
- Unlicensed and LMSW's often work multiple demanding jobs, in efforts to keep up with the cost of living, while managing intensive caseloads and paperwork requirements, while studying for the LMSW/LCSW/C exams, which is not feasible, conducive or healthy
- Master Level Social Work Interns transfer their client caseloads after a few months of direct service because once their internship is complete, they no longer meet the requirements necessary to carry out the same position, until they pass the exam which has perpetuated a cycle of premature termination of clients, overburdening existing licensed Social Workers with transferred cases or placing vulnerable clients on another wait list, either internally or externally
- The lack of diverse representation in the field often prevents marginalized community members from seeking out mental health services or sustaining mental health services due to existing health care disparities

Those who have played and/or continue to play an integral part in the Social Work field but who have not taken the Social Work exam, such as 1) those who have been “grandfathered in” 2) Social Work Interns and 3) those who received temporary exemptions surrounding exam restrictions during the pandemic, have proven that solid and very essential work can be done despite the exam not being taken.

Ultimately, temporary licensure and additional pathways for licensure eligibility are critical for all Social Workers if we truly want to: 1) reform the efficacy of Social Work service delivery outcomes in Maryland 2) improve the quality of life for Maryland residents and 3) cultivate equity by discontinuing the perpetuation of racial trauma and systematic gatekeeping that Maryland Social Workers are being subjected to via bias exam licensure limitations.

Please see the link below for the 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis Report.

<https://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022-ASWB-Exam-Pass-Rate-Analysis.pdf>

In conclusion, I am writing to share my support for **SB871** + **SB145** with the following amendments:

1.SB871- Reinstate the moratorium on all biased social work licensing exams

The moratorium is currently amended out of SB871, which means it only provides a workgroup. It does not put a stop to the on-going, expensive harms of culturally biased exams. A moratorium on all biased exams is essential.

2.SB145 - Change “The Board may...” to “The Board shall...”

The shift in language from “may” to “shall” requires BSWE to grant temporary licensure to qualified candidates. BSWE has yet to address disparities in social work licensure, so it is difficult to believe that we can trust their discretion.

3.SB145 - Temporary Licensure for LCSW-Cs

Temporary licensure for social work candidates at the Clinical level (LCSW-C) is currently amended out of SB145. Given 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 but are unable to do so because of the barrier of a biased exam.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter and for your consideration of favorable votes for both SB871 and SB145.

Sincerely,

Victoria Rodriguez
Social Worker/Therapist

