

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS OF SENATE BILL 871
Social Workers – Sunset Extension, Notification of Complete Application,
and Workgroup on Social Work Examination Requirements for Licensure

FINANCE COMMITTEE
March 30, 2023

Thank you, Chair Peña-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, for your serious consideration of SB 871. I strongly support SB 871, but respectfully request amendments to restore the moratorium.

The social work licensing exams do not assess whether someone will practice competently or safely, and anyone who claims that they do must accept an absurd and offensive position. If the function of the social work licensing exams is to assess competency, guarantee safety, promote accountability, or ensure ethical practice, then we must choose from two options:

- either the exams are functionally unsound, in which case there would be no legitimate reason to maintain them;
- or white people are more competent social workers than Black people, younger people are safer social workers than older people, native English speakers are more accountable social workers than non-native English speakers, and people who are not disabled are more ethical social workers than those who are disabled.

The second option is both absurd and offensive, so the only option is to accept that the exam clearly does not assess one's ability or ethics. Indeed, there is no evidence of a relationship between exam scores and safe, effective, or ethical social work,ⁱ and **there is ample evidence of the harm caused by the examsⁱⁱ – both on those who repeatedly fail the exams, and those they might be serving.**

Maryland's shortage of social workers is made significantly worse by the exam disparities. If all test-takers passed at the same rate as white test-takers, Maryland would have had over twelve hundred more social workers serving its residents in the past decade.ⁱⁱⁱ I have served on boards of directors for social service agencies that have had been unable to hire, retain, and promote people who are effective at working with some of Maryland's most vulnerable residents because they have been repeatedly unable to pass licensure exams.

While the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) has only recently released data demonstrating clear and alarming disparities in pass rates,^{iv} these have been well-known for years. Indeed, in my years in and adjacent to social work practice and education, I have witnessed some of the most effective and exemplary practitioners fail the exams multiple times. Disproportionately, those who struggled most to pass the exam were my colleagues and students who were Black or brown, older, lower income, non-native English speakers, or people disabled by the systems and structures of our society. **And yet, the ASWB and others have failed to act with any decisiveness – and now believe we need more time before we act to end such disparities. Their failures necessitate your action.**

I respectfully request that your Committee amend SB 871 to reinstate the moratorium on all of the biased social work licensing exams to suspend immediately the harm they are causing – rather

than creating a two-tiered system of provisional licensure. Regrettably, the moratorium has been amended out of the bill currently under consideration by your committee. There can be no doubt that the exams are biased – both based on the subjectivity of the questions and on the disparities in passage rates. Indeed, this is the impetus for creating the workgroup in SB 871. **I request that you support an amendment to end the bias and harm that everyone acknowledges and accepts.**

SB 871 leaves in place all other requirements for licensure – including education, practice, and supervision requirements – and creates a workgroup to improve the licensure process. I support amendments to diversify the voices and experiences of those serving on the workgroup, which were added by the Finance Committee.

I thank you for your time and consideration, and I strongly urge a favorable report on SB 871 – with amendments to reinstate the moratorium on all the biased social work exams, to end the harm they cause and the offensive statements implied by their disparate passage rates.

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ⁱ Caldwell, B.E. & Rousmaniere, T. (2022). Clinical licensing exams in mental health care. <https://www.psychotherapynotes.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Clinical-Licensing-Exams-in-Mental-Health-Care-October-2022.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Castex, G., Senreich, E., Phillips, N. K., Miller, C. M., & Mazza, C. (2019). Microaggressions and racial privilege within the social work profession: The social work licensing examinations. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 28(2), 211-228. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15313204.2018.1555498>

ⁱⁱⁱ Association of Social Work Boards (2022). Exam pass rates by state/province. <https://www.aswb.org/exam/contributing-to-the-conversation/aswb-exam-pass-rates-by-state-province/>

^{iv} Association of Social Work Boards (2022). Contributing to the conversation: 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis. <https://www.aswb.org/exam/contributing-to-the-conversation/>