

March 28, 2023

To: Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee

From: Philicia Ross, LMSW

Re: SB0871 Social Workers - Sunset Extension, Notification of Complete Application, and Workgroup on Social Worker Examination Requirements for Licensure

SB0145 State Board of Social Work Examiners - Conditional and Temporary Licenses to Practice Social Work

Position: Favorable

House Health and Government Operations Committee Members,

Please **vote favorably on SB0871 and SB0145**. These bills create a diversified work group addressing alternatives to culturally biased exams. In addition, these bills allow people with Bachelor of Social Work (BSWs) and Masters of Social Work (MSWs) degrees to enter and advance in the social work profession without passing a very biased exam.

When I graduated from my Masters of Social Work program, I was prepared for many things. I was prepared to continue my education beyond the classroom by getting certified in specific modalities to serve populations most harmed by an impending mental and public health crisis. I was prepared to continue to be clinically supervised so I could be prepared to serve the most vulnerable. I was prepared to continue background checks and uphold the values and ethics instilled in me. I was prepared with over 1000+ hours of supervised direct service. I had done my work by working at substance use crisis centers, working with underserved adult and youth populations, as well as understanding clinical work through providing individual and group therapy while supervised by a group of clinical supervisors that oversaw my practicum program and looked over two-plus pages of progress reports that I had to submit every week to ensure I was doing what was expected of me not only professionally but in a way that was culturally and situation congruent to the populations I served. When I graduated with my Masters's Degree in 2019, I was prepared to enter the field as a social worker. And yet, I wasn't considered a social worker in Maryland because I had not yet taken the ASWB Masters Level Exam.

This I needed time to not only digest but prepare for. I needed time, not only because of the BSWE taking theirs, to review my application and get back to me in a timely manner, as their website suggests. Time because the exam questions had nothing to do with

what I had learned about the field. I could not be authentic to all I had taken over the last two years, all I had learned from my supervisors and field practice. You may not know, but it is common in test preparation programs to be told: “forget everything you learned about practice. This is about what *they* feel you should know”. I’m unsure of how a third-party vendor could have such power that I would have to, for several hours at a testing center, not answer as what I knew of the field but as “they” would want me to. Even though I had done two years of unpaid labor, I worked two or three jobs that not only complemented those hours but allowed me to survive through a rigorous advanced degree program. None of them counted towards my clinical licensure, even though, by definition, of the requirements outside of taking the exam, they should have.

I have heard the argument that this exam is keeping harmful social workers out and protecting the public. Consider if this is true; when you look up social workers who have caused actual harm, they have passed this exam. So what harm is it truly mitigating? I have also heard that these bills will delegitimize the field. Consider if this is true because, as a budding researcher, I have found no evidence of a relationship between exam scores and safe, ethical, or effective social work. This legislation would allow us to address licensing fairly and ethically – which would strengthen, not impair, the profession's legitimacy. We also might argue that racist, ageist, ableist, and anglophile disparities undermine the profession.

I have heard that these bills will create a two-tiered system in social work. Again, consider how this can be true when two tiers already exist: those who can pass this exam and get licensed, some of whom are still found harmful even after passing, and those who can not pass to no fault of their own, as the [ASWB data suggests](#). This bill will not create “*separate but equal*” but instead mitigate the harm that thousands of social workers, including myself, are experiencing. *And, we don't know what we are getting wrong as the ASWB is a pass/fail exam and does not provide data on what areas we need to improve upon like other health professions.*

I have heard that this exam will affect the impending compact. However, the Social Work Licensure Compact has not yet been enacted into law, but the draft released on February 27, 2023, allows states that don't require ASWB exams for licensure to join. It also allows for licensure to be granted through either a Qualifying National Exam or substantial equivalency of competency requirements determined by the Compact Commission. SB0871 & SB0145 don't make any changes that disqualify Maryland from enacting the Social Work Licensure Compact as written. Individual social workers licensed in Maryland or any state without passing the ASWB exams can obtain licensure through the Compact in another state by passing a Qualifying National Exam or completing substantial equivalency of competency requirements in place at that time.

This does not have to be just in the hands of the ASWB, which has had over ten years to mitigate the harm they were causing and decidedly chose to deny until they had insurmountable pressure from the public. Can Maryland trust a vendor that has to be pressured into ensuring they aren't the harm, and even worse when they found out only then decided to change course once they were under intense scrutiny? Social Work is too special of a profession to be subjected to a vendor that takes it, and those of us who work this system day in and day out lightly.

Ultimately what I've noticed is that those who have been harmed, like me and thousands of others who have been harmed, are missing from a lot of these conversations. I'm not a number. I'm not someone who didn't study enough. I am someone who is currently supervised, continues to get her continuing education credits, ensures, has completed every requirement, and can't pass a test because I don't think like "them." And my story is not unique. My story is an unfortunate norm.

To mitigate the harm I and many, many others like me are experiencing, I would have preferred to have the committee vote favorably on the following amendments:

SB0871

Reinstatement of the 1-year moratorium on all social work licensing exams. While we wait for a workgroup to identify long-term solutions, social work professionals already licensed at the Master's Level (LMSWs) will continue to be denied promotions while often paying hundreds of dollars per month in mandatory supervision while they continue to try to pass the LCSW-C exam. A moratorium would pause the requirement to pass culturally biased exams to achieve licensure while allowing more social workers to become licensed under the BSWE.

Adjust language in the workgroup, per request by the Deaf and hard of hearing community, from "a representative of Gallaudet University" to "A social worker designated by the Maryland Association of the Deaf who is familiar with the licensing process for deaf and hard of hearing social workers." A representative from Gallaudet does not ensure that the representative is Deaf or understands the exam issue from the Deaf perspective.

SB0145

Change "The BSWE may..." to "The BSWE shall..." The BSWE has historically not addressed disparities in social work licensing and opposed temporary licensing. The shift from "may" to "shall" ensures the Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) grants temporary licensure to eligible candidates.

Reinstate 2-year temporary licensure for LCSW-Cs. Temporary licensure for LCSW-C is currently amended out of SB0145. The LCSW-C exam is just as biased as

the LBSW and LMSW exams. We must include LCSW-Cs as possible candidates for temporary licensure. Many are ready to advance in our field but need help because of the barrier of a biased exam.

However, this isn't just about me. This is about social workers and the field we deeply love, even though we are often underpaid and undervalued. I want to ensure this field lives up to what I know it can be. I became a social worker to ensure that those who aren't heard find their voice. For those in situations that most would walk past. Now, over 1000+ social workers are in a situation where they have been passed over. These bills, while not perfect for everyone, would ensure this field lives up to the same ethics we are told to be proud of every March (Social Work Month).

I urge a **favorable vote on SB0871 and SB0145**. Please see attached [2-page policy brief](#) and [detailed fact sheet](#) for more in-depth information regarding some of what I've mentioned in this testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

Philicia Ross, LMSW

A very dope & culturally competent social worker