

January 31, 2025

To: Members of the Finance Committee

Re: SB379 - State Board of Social Work Examiners – Membership and Examination Requirements

Position: FOR – Vote to support the findings of your mandated working group!

Regarding the undeniable and blatant discrimination of the ASWB licensing exams, and the detrimental effect such discrimination has on the mental well-being and health of our communities, you will be hearing a lot of data, analysis and opinions. First-time pass rates, ultimate pass rates, obstacles to success, norming procedures, etc. etc.

Here is what jumps out at me, as an experienced, licensed clinical social worker serving Baltimore City, as the most important statistic you need to focus on:

Nearly 50% of all Black Masters of Social Work, legitimately graduated from a nationally accredited social work program, will never practice as a licensed social worker.

These numbers are only slightly better in other groups of color.

Please place that fact in the context of a dire shortage of mental health providers, especially in marginalized communities of color.

We simply cannot afford to lose these dedicated, talented and caring professionals based on a standardized test that is widely understood to be normed to middle class white patterns of practice.

Wait!, you might reasonably ask, are you saying that we should send *less qualified* social workers to work in communities of color? As the guardians of the public interest, the State clearly has the responsibility to protect prospective clients and ensure that they will be served by qualified, ethical and safe practitioners. Doesn't the BSWE need the exam in order to do that job?

Of course, no one is suggesting communities of color should be served by less qualified clinicians – quite the contrary. Here are three important pieces of information that address this question.

1. There is extensive research from all over the country indicating that *the test does not correlate at all to quality or safety of practice.*
2. There are skills and qualities, inherent to cultural competence, that arise from identity and lived experience. In many cases, these make social workers *better qualified* to provide appropriate care.
3. These newly minted social workers are never operating without close **supervision**, and cannot be for several years. Board-approved supervisors are bound to provide for the safe practice and quality of their supervisees.

Opponents want you to believe that you should leave standardized testing in place because it is “objective” and because “other professions use it.” Please understand: clinical social work is not like architecture, engineering, accounting, medicine, etc.: human emotions and behavior do not move in predictable or standardized ways, like cells or structures, chemicals or numbers. ***Our profession demands nuanced and sensitive responses to unique individuals, situations, communities and cultures, using not only theory and data, but life experience and cultural wisdom.***

Just as a case in point, Illinois eliminated entry-level exams in mid-2021, even before the discrimination data were released – then licensed 10 times the number of social workers in 2022. There has been no detrimental impact - instead huge benefits to every stakeholder.

As a 69-year-old, white, middle class, clinical social worker, treating chronic and complex trauma, I have learned more than I can say about how best to serve my clients of color from younger and much less experienced graduates and clinicians – because they as people of color, knew best what was needed, saw nuance beneath the obvious, applied deeply felt cultural and ethnic norms, etc. Expertise comes in many forms – and our field needs all kinds. Standardized test-taking is NOT one of them!

Underlying the defense of the exam is an insidious and patently false message. If the defenders claim that the exams are ***reliable measures of competence and safety*** and acknowledge that white test-takers perform nearly twice as well than Black ones with equivalent educational attainment, ***they must conclude that white candidates for licensing are indeed twice as competent and safe as Black candidates*** (with others of color, elders, and other language speakers or otherwise abled candidates ranging between, also less competent than white candidates). ***This conclusion is patently false and abhorrent.***

Much to my surprise, I passed the exam on the first try. But it was not surprising: the exams were normed for me (well, a bit younger since I came to the profession later in life). Even so, in many instances, when questions asked “what should you do if...?” I had to choose a response that failed to consider the conditions many of my clients face and many of the needs they have. Often, my correct response did not align with what I most likely would have actually done. What I offer clients in marginalized Baltimore communities is not the same as what might be offered in Des Moines, Iowa – or even in Towson or Hagerstown. My success did not reflect superior social work skills, experience or judgment: just the ability to guess the mindset of the exam designers.

Although many of us called for the immediate elimination of the Masters level exam two years ago, the MLA chose the more cautious path of establishing a diverse and representative Working Group, including the powerful BSWE which continues to fight for the injustice. You working groups studied the issue in granular detail, looking at research, practice, and the experiences of states that have made this critical change – their conclusion was to recommend elimination of the Master-level exam. **Please support the recommendation of your Working Group and Vote Favorably on SB379.**

Most sincerely,

Jessica Strauss