

Senate Finance Committee

January 31, 2025

SENATE BILL 379

State Board of Social Work Examiners – Membership and Examination Requirements

\*\*\*OPPOSE\*\*\*

Honorable Members of the Committee,

My name is Dionne Brown-Bushrod. I am a Maryland Licensed Certified Clinical Social Worker, and I strongly oppose Senate Bill 379, which seeks to eliminate the examination requirement for bachelor's and master's social work licensure in Maryland. While I am unclear on the bill's intent—whether to address workforce shortages or combat racism—I must emphasize that whatever the reason, this bill undermines public trust, professional integrity, and social work's standing as a healthcare profession.

Licensing exams ensure that Licensed Bachelor Social Workers (LBSWs) and Licensed Master Social Workers (LMSWs) possess the foundational knowledge and ethical competence to serve Maryland's most vulnerable populations. These professionals work in nursing homes, hospitals, crisis centers, and community programs, providing essential services in mental health, substance use, care coordination, and program administration.

Eliminating the exam removes an essential expectation set by the public. One client put it plainly: *"If a doctor takes a test, I think everyone who says they are a professional should take a test."* Another client stated: *"If I just wanted to talk to someone with a college degree, I could talk to my friends. The person helping me should have to meet professional standards, and taking a test is one of them."* The public expects qualified professionals, and lowering standards for social work licenses sends the wrong message about the quality-of-care clients should receive.

**If the Public's Concerns Do Not Give Pause, Consider the Other Harmful Consequences of This Bill**

- LMSWs are legally required to practice under supervision. Without an exam verifying their baseline competency, many supervisors will hesitate to put their own licenses at risk by supervising untested licensees.
- I began my social work career at Spring Grove Hospital Center, working alongside psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurses. I later served as a social worker at Sheppard Pratt. Can you imagine how I would have been treated if I lacked the same licensure qualifications as my colleagues? Being a good person and trying your best is not what makes a profession—credentials matter and the road to credentials matter.
- Employers will see untested social workers as less qualified and higher-risk hires, leading to lower pay and fewer job opportunities compared to their peers in healthcare who meet exam-based qualifications.
- Without an exam, how can we differentiate LBSWs and LMSWs from lower-paid community or social service workers who are not considered healthcare professionals under the Maryland Health Occupations Article? If social work no longer aligns with other licensed healthcare

professions, will legislators move the profession out of the health occupations category entirely? What happens when other healthcare professions challenge social work's place in the healthcare profession?

If this bill was intended to address workforce shortages, I must point out that the 2023 Senate Bill 283 that created the needs assessment for behavioral healthcare talent highlighted the critical and growing need for behavioral health providers. Please note that none of the other healthcare professions facing shortages are lowering their qualifications to address the problem.

If this bill is meant to address social justice, then I must ask—where is the full complement of social justice initiatives? Are we truly making meaningful changes, or are we legislating performative action instead of substantive reform? Eliminating the exam does not solve systemic disparities. It ignores bias in education, access to resources, and structural inequities from preschool through graduate school. Testing pass rates serve as a diagnostic tool to identify where support is needed, not just in social work, but across all licensed professions.

This bill creates a feel-good moment at the cost of real progress. It will ultimately disenfranchise the social work profession, especially marginalized licensees who will face even greater challenges without a recognized and respected licensure process. How is that justice?

I urge an unfavorable report and reject Senate Bill 379 and instead focus on strengthening licensure requirements, not eliminating them. Public trust, professional credibility, client safety, client expectations and real social justice depend on it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Dionne Brown-Bushrod, MSW, LCSW-C