Dear Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Aaraa Brown, B.Ed., and I am a proud Black woman, a former educator, and a current social work student. I am writing to urge you to codify the workgroup recommendations and issue a favorable report for SB379. This bill will increase accountability for the Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) by adding two more consumer members and create a more equitable path to social work licensure—without sacrificing the competence and integrity of the profession.

As a former teacher and a future social worker, I have seen firsthand how systemic barriers disproportionately impact Black and Brown professionals who are eager to serve their communities. The 2022 data released by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) exposes alarming disparities in social work licensing exam pass rates. The numbers are staggering: first-time pass rates for white candidates are around 84%, while only 45% of Black candidates and 64% of Hispanic candidates pass on their first attempt. These disparities are not a reflection of competence, but of long-standing biases embedded in standardized testing—biases that have historically shut out marginalized communities from professional opportunities.

Maryland took an important step by forming a Social Work Licensing Workgroup in 2023 to examine these disparities. The workgroup, after hearing from a diverse range of experts—including ASWB representatives, a nursing exam specialist, and social work leaders from states that have reformed licensure—determined that removing the exam requirement at the Bachelor's (LBSW) and Master's (LMSW) levels is the most equitable and effective way forward.

When we allow a single, biased exam to serve as the ultimate gatekeeper to this profession, we deprive marginalized communities of representation in social work. Based on ASWB's own data from 2011-2021, Maryland could have had an additional **1,227 licensed social workers** if all demographic groups had passed the exam at the same rate as white candidates. Imagine the impact these professionals could have had in our hospitals, schools, foster care agencies, and community mental health centers. The clients who need social work services the most—Black and Brown communities, non-English speakers, low-income families—deserve a workforce that reflects their lived experiences.

ASWB has had 40 years to prove that its exams are linked to safe and effective social work practice, yet it has never been able to do so. Social work is a deeply relational and person-centered profession—one that cannot be measured by multiple-choice questions. Every social work graduate completes extensive fieldwork (at least 400 hours for BSWs and 900 hours for MSWs) under the supervision of experienced professionals. These direct practice experiences are the best assessment of a social worker's skills, not a standardized test that has been proven to be biased.

Additionally, the financial burden of the ASWB exams disproportionately impacts those who are already economically disadvantaged. The $230-260 exam fee, plus the costs of retaking the test, adds another layer of inequity. Many students—especially first-generation college graduates and those from historically underrepresented backgrounds—simply cannot afford repeated attempts.

This financial strain, coupled with the stress of an exam designed for them to fail, discourages talented individuals from even entering the field.

Other states have already recognized these inequities and taken action. Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont have all reformed or eliminated licensing exams at the Bachelor's and Master's levels. There is no evidence that removing the exam has harmed public safety—only that it has expanded the pipeline for a more diverse, competent social work workforce.

Despite these clear inequities, BSWE has consistently aligned itself with ASWB's financial interests rather than prioritizing Marylanders' need for accessible, culturally responsive mental health care. SB379 takes a crucial step in addressing this by adding consumer members to the board, ensuring greater accountability and oversight.

As a social work student, I want my future colleagues to reflect the diversity of Maryland's communities. But right now, the numbers show that this is not happening. According to Maryland's own Behavioral Health Workforce Assessment, MSW graduation rates are declining, and **70% of social work graduates will not be serving Marylanders in a social work capacity within one year of graduation.** The licensing exam is one of the many systemic barriers preventing us from building the workforce Maryland desperately needs.

Maryland has long been a leader in advancing equity. Now, we have an opportunity to modernize our social work licensing process to ensure that qualified, passionate professionals—especially those from marginalized communities—can enter the field without being blocked by a biased, outdated exam. Please support SB379 and help create a more just, diverse, and effective social work workforce for Maryland.

Sincerely,
Aaraa Brown, B.Ed.
Class of 2025
Maryland Congressional District 4
Maryland Legislative District 24