

Dear Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

I request that you codify workgroup recommendations and **find a favorable report for SB379**. By adding two more consumer members, this bill will increase accountability to the Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) and create a more equitable path to social work without sacrificing social work competence.

In 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released [data](#) that shows alarming disparities in pass rates of social work licensing exams. These disparities demonstrate lower pass rates in BIPOC, older, and multilingual social workers. According to ASWB's data, first-time pass rates for white candidates are around **84%**, compared to **45%** for Black candidates and **64%** for Hispanic candidates. Additionally, pass rates go down as test taker age goes up. We know these disparities are not due to competence but are inherent in the design of standardized testing, which has a consistent bias against already marginalized groups.

In response to the data release, the Maryland legislature passed a social work licensing workgroup in 2023, and it was signed into law. The workgroup started meeting in October 2023. They have been meeting monthly and heard from diverse perspectives, including two presentations by ASWB, a nursing exam expert, and the Director of NASW-Illinois, who reviewed the effects of licensure reform efforts in that state. The workgroup determined that removing the exam at the Bachelor (LBSW) and Masters (LMSW) levels is the best way to move forward for our state.

We also know that standardized testing bias means that marginalized communities are deprived of representation in social work. Dedicated Maryland social workers who would like to serve their communities face only one barrier with the ultimate veto power in their ability to work - a demonstrably biased exam. Based on ASWB data from 2011-2021, Maryland would have an additional [1227](#) licensed social workers if every demographic group passed at the same rate as white social workers. Imagine what an impact these social workers could make on our underserved communities if they could practice! LBSWs and LMSWs are usually the ones doing the essential but unglamorous direct care work in hospitals, community mental health centers, and foster care agencies. A more diverse workforce enhances cultural humility and improves outcomes for clients from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Clients deserve to see a workforce that represents them, and this bill will allow that to happen without sacrificing social work competence.

Repeating a statement over and over again does not make it accurate. ASWB has had 40 years to provide proof that its exams are correlated with safe and effective social work practice, and it has not done so. ASWB only released pass rate data under incredible pressure, proving what social workers have colloquially known for years. Much as ASWB would like to convince you otherwise, there is no accurate way to measure social work

competence objectively. Social work is highly person-centered; people are not standardized, and impossible-to-measure skills such as empathy are paramount to social work. Research indicates that standardized tests are often culturally biased, relying on knowledge and reasoning shaped by dominant cultural norms. Differing knowledge and ways of thinking are a core strength of social work, but our licensing exams treat them as liabilities to be weeded out.

Every new BSW graduate has at least 400 hours of supervised practice, and every MSW graduate has at least 900 hours of supervised practice. The best way to assess foundational social work skills is by careful observation by supervisors during education and supervised practice. Social work's rich tradition of field education and mentorship by more seasoned social workers is a far better tool to catch and address problems.

In addition to not providing any measurement of social work skills, ASWB exams are a substantial financial burden on test-takers, especially those who have to take it multiple times. Students from already marginalized backgrounds have a more challenging time affording \$230-260 in exam fees, and the delays from retakes of the exams plus saving up for the exam fees only exacerbate inequalities that already exist. I am a 60-year-old African American male who has taken the exam 4 times, failing by less than 5 points each time. My last attempt was 10/28/2024. I needed a 98 but received a 96. I have spent thousands of dollars on the exam, application fees, boot camps, and individual tutors. I have been working in the field of social since 2021. My job reduced my pay because I did not pass, but it did not reduce my responsibilities. I am getting paid as a Counselor II with my Social Work Care Manager title. Now, the state is not renewing my program grant, and because of the exam, I am reduced to taking a less-paying position because I do not have LMSW behind my name. I am now in the process of filing for bankruptcy.

Multiple other states have led the way in reducing the influence of harmful ASWB exams in their states. Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont have all paused or removed exam barriers since the ASWB data release in 2022, with multiple other states never having exams for the bachelor and master license levels. There is no evidence that the lack of exams or exam removal has harmed the public. Because Illinois has some of the most easily accessible data and a slightly more extended period of Masters level exam removal, they were studied in more detail in the Workgroup [final report](#) (page 36-37). Exam removal has had zero effect on the number of sanctions in that state.

Our BSWE is a member of the ASWB. It was one of few organizations afforded two seats on the Social Work Licensing Workgroup. Unfortunately, BSWE's allegiances are unclear and potentially problematic for a Maryland-based board. They consistently sided with ASWB's financial interests rather than centering the

interests of Marylanders who desperately need culturally responsive social work services. I applaud this legislation for increasing oversight by adding consumer members.

Maryland has long emphasized equity in various other programs, and the field of social work should be no different. We have an incredible opportunity to remove outdated, biased licensing models and modernize our state's social work licensing process to address our behavioral health workforce demands. Thank you for accepting my testimony. Please find a favorable report on SB379.

Sincerely,

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