

**Dear Members of the Senate Finance Committee,**

My name is **Philicia Ross**, and I am the **NAACP Appointee to the Maryland Workgroup on Social Work Licensure Requirements**. I am urging you to vote FAVORABLE on SB379. I have firsthand knowledge of the workgroup's findings and recommendations. I started as an **LMSW** when this workgroup convened and became a **Licensed Clinical Social Worker-Certified (LCSW-C) in December 2023**. In April 2024, I opened my private practice, **Village of Sound Mind**, focusing on **Women of Color, Queer folx, and individuals living with invisible and chronic illnesses**—communities that are vastly underrepresented in mental health care. By **November 2024, my practice was full**, and I had **no one to refer new clients to** who met their needs for representation due to colleagues also being full or simply not existing.

This reality **isn't just about numbers—it's about impact**.

- When a **Black woman survivor of domestic violence** cannot find a provider who understands the cultural nuances of her experience, she **stays in crisis longer** or does not receive services at all.
- When a **queer young adult** seeking gender-affirming mental health support encounters a provider unfamiliar with their needs, they are forced to **educate the professional who is supposed to help them**.
- When someone with a **chronic illness like sickle cell disease or fibromyalgia** struggles to access a therapist who understands their **intersection of physical and mental health needs**, they go without.

This is the direct result of **barriers in social work licensure that prevent diverse, competent social workers from entering the field**. The **ASWB exam is the greatest of these barriers**.

While the committee has heard about the disparities in test outcomes, I want to bring a **new perspective**:

- **The ASWB exam was never designed to measure clinical readiness**. Unlike other professional licensing exams, it does not assess applied skills or real-world decision-making. The ASWB itself **has never provided evidence** that its exam is correlated with effective social work practice.
- **Maryland has already determined that we have a behavioral health crisis**. The 2024 report from the Maryland Health Care Commission states that we need **32,800 more behavioral health workers by 2028**, yet we continue to uphold barriers that **actively prevent** trained social workers from entering the field.
- **Social work licensure already requires rigorous training**. Every MSW graduate completes at least **900 hours of supervised practice**, plus additional clinical supervision for those seeking advanced licensure. The idea that removing this exam would create an unqualified workforce is simply untrue.

**Removing the Exam Is Not Lowering the Bar—It's Removing a Barrier**

Opponents of this bill claim that removing the ASWB exam will lower standards for social work. That is **not true**. The workgroup's recommendation is not about lowering the bar—it's about **replacing an ineffective and inequitable tool** with a **more rigorous, experience-based assessment**.

The workgroup recommends:

1. **Issuing LBSW and LMSW licenses based on education and supervised fieldwork, not an exam.**
2. **Creating an alternative pathway for LCSW-Cs that emphasizes clinical hours and mentorship rather than a multiple-choice test.**
3. **Investing in a workforce pipeline that prioritizes lived experience, cultural competency, and real-world readiness over standardized testing.**

This does **not** create a two-tiered system—the **two-tiered system already exists** because of the ASWB exam. The test has veto power over whether a trained professional, who has already completed years of education and hands-on experience, can serve their community.

### **Maryland Must Lead**

States like **Illinois, Minnesota, and Connecticut** have already reduced their reliance on licensing exams, with **no evidence of harm to public safety**. Maryland should be **at the forefront** of this reform, not trailing behind.

Passing **SB379** will do more than improve equity—it will:

- **Strengthen Maryland's social work workforce** in schools, hospitals, and community clinics.
- **Reduce the state's reliance on costly crisis interventions** by ensuring that people can access preventative care sooner.
- **Increase financial stability for new social workers** by eliminating unnecessary exam fees and repeated testing cycles.

The ASWB exam does **not** make social work better. **It makes it less accessible**. It is time for Maryland to lead in fixing this broken system.

I urge you to **pass SB379** and help us build a **stronger, more representative, and more effective social work profession**.

**Thank you for your time and consideration.**

**Respectfully,**

*Philicia Ross, LCSW-C*

NAACP Appointee, Workgroup on Social Work Licensure Requirements

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