

Honorable Members of the Committee,

I strongly oppose Senate Bill 379, which seeks to eliminate the examination requirement for bachelor's and master's social work licensure in Maryland. As an African American Maryland social work licensee with 15 years of experience, I have seen firsthand the importance of maintaining rigorous qualifications within the profession.

Licensure exams are essential to ensuring that social workers possess the foundational knowledge and ethical competence necessary to meet the needs of clients. Eliminating this requirement compromises public trust, leaving clients uncertain about the qualifications of their providers. As a Social Worker in Maryland there was also no survey or poll of Social Workers to determine our status of SB 379. Again, you have people making decisions without the body they represent weighing in.

Below is my reasoning for opposing Senate Bill 379.

### **1. Contradiction to Identified Disparities**

The data showing disparities in exam pass rates has pointed to systemic issues such as:

- **Educational Inequities:** Gaps in academic preparedness among students from diverse backgrounds.
- **Access to Resources:** Differences in financial ability to afford test prep materials, courses, and exam fees.
- **Systemic Bias:** Potential biases in exam design that do not adequately reflect the experiences of all test-takers.

#### **How SB 379 Contradicts These Findings:**

- **Ignoring the Root Causes:** Instead of addressing systemic inequities through targeted interventions, such as additional support and accessible test preparation, SB 379 eliminates the exam altogether, failing to provide meaningful solutions to those facing barriers.
- **Failure to Improve Education Systems:** The bill bypasses efforts to enhance educational opportunities and resources that could better prepare future social workers, leaving institutions and students without a clear pathway for competency validation.
- **Missed Opportunity for Reform:** Instead of working with licensing bodies to improve the exam process (e.g., cultural sensitivity, alternative testing methods), the bill removes an essential assessment tool, potentially weakening the profession's standards.

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### **2. Compromises Public Safety and Professional Competence**

- **Risk of Incompetent Practice:** Licensing exams serve as an objective measure to ensure that social workers possess the minimum required knowledge and competencies to practice safely and ethically. Without exams, there is no standardized mechanism to verify

competency, which could result in unqualified individuals providing services to vulnerable populations.

- **Increased Risk to Clients:** Social workers often work with individuals facing complex mental health, substance abuse, and social crises. A lack of standardized assessment may lead to critical knowledge gaps, increasing the risk of harm to clients and communities.
- **Lack of Accountability:** The absence of an exam removes a key component of professional accountability, making it difficult to assess the readiness of new practitioners and uphold standards of care.

#### **Counterpoint to Supporters' Argument:**

While supporters argue that educational training and practical experience are sufficient measures of competence, academic programs vary in rigor, and without a uniform assessment, there is no guarantee that all graduates meet the same level of knowledge and ethical understanding required for professional practice.

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### **3. Licensing Exams Ensure Standardization and Professional Integrity**

- **Uniformity Across Jurisdictions:** Many states require social work licensure exams, ensuring a consistent standard of practice nationwide. Removing the exam requirement could isolate Maryland professionals and create barriers to interstate mobility.
- **Regulatory Consistency:** Exams provide an objective way to measure competence across various educational backgrounds, ensuring that all licensed professionals meet the same baseline expectations.
- **Employer Confidence:** Organizations that hire social workers rely on licensure exams to verify a candidate's readiness. Without it, employers may face challenges in assessing qualifications, potentially leading to hiring risks and increased training costs.

#### **Counterpoint to Supporters' Argument:**

While some states are exploring alternatives to licensing exams, most still recognize the importance of objective assessment tools to maintain consistency and protect public interest. The absence of exams could lead to fragmented regulatory frameworks.

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### **4. Disadvantages to Future Licensees**

Eliminating the licensing exam requirement could negatively impact future social workers by:

- **Limiting Interstate Mobility:** Many states require exams for social work licensure, meaning Maryland social workers may struggle to gain licensure elsewhere, limiting career opportunities.
- **Employer Skepticism:** Without a standardized exam, employers may prefer candidates from states with exam-based licensure, putting Maryland graduates at a disadvantage.
- **Professional Confidence:** Without the rigor of exam preparation, licensees may lack confidence in their competency, potentially affecting their performance and career advancement.

- **Insurance and Credentialing Challenges:** Many insurance companies and organizations require proof of licensure through exams to ensure professionals meet established benchmarks.
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## 5. Potential Legal and Ethical Challenges

- **Liability and Malpractice Risks:** Without a standardized exam, employers and the regulatory board may face increased liability if unqualified practitioners provide substandard services, potentially leading to malpractice lawsuits and loss of public trust.
  - **Challenges in Disciplinary Actions:** The licensure exam serves as a legal benchmark for competency. Without it, disciplinary actions against incompetent practitioners may become more difficult, weakening regulatory enforcement and professional accountability.
  - **Regulatory Fragmentation:** Removing the exam may result in inconsistent criteria for licensure across states, creating confusion for professionals seeking cross-jurisdictional practice.
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## 6. Workforce Challenges Should Be Addressed Through Better Support, Not Lowering Standards

- **Retention and Support Over Elimination:** Addressing social work shortages should focus on better incentives, loan forgiveness programs, and stronger mentoring opportunities rather than compromising licensing standards.
  - **Short-Term Fix with Long-Term Consequences:** Removing the exam might offer immediate relief for workforce shortages, but the long-term consequences could include higher turnover, client dissatisfaction, and overall decline in service quality.
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## 7. Professional Recognition and Interstate Mobility

- **Reduced Professional Mobility:** Maryland social workers may face challenges when seeking licensure in other states, as most jurisdictions require exams. This could limit career growth and professional opportunities.
  - **Challenges with National Certification:** Without exams, Maryland professionals might face barriers in obtaining certifications that are recognized nationally.
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## 8. Board Composition Changes Could Weaken Professional Oversight

- **Loss of Expert Oversight:** Reducing the number of licensed social workers on the State Board of Social Work Examiners could result in a lack of expertise in making regulatory decisions, potentially leading to policies that do not adequately address the complexities of social work practice.

- **Imbalance in Representation:** Consumer input is valuable, but professional oversight is critical in ensuring licensure standards and ethical considerations remain a priority.

Sincerely,

Doncella Wilson, LMSW