

Favorable testimony for SB0379

Submitted on behalf of the University of Maryland School of Social Work by:

Dawn Shafer, PhD, LCSW-C  
Amanda Lehning, PhD, MSW  
Temeka Bailey, PhD, LCSW-C

Dear Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

We are writing to share our support for SB0379. As Associate Deans and Directors at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, we are invested in ensuring an equitable path to licensure for our MSW graduates. The exam pass rates released by the Association of Social Work Boards in 2022 clearly indicate significant disparities based on social identities, something that is deeply troubling in a field that seeks to further social justice and equity within our society.

As mandated by SB0871 in April 2023, the Maryland Workgroup on Social Worker Requirements for Licensure has comprehensively examined this issue and provided the recommendation that Maryland remove the ASWB exam requirement for bachelor and master social work licenses. We strongly agree with this recommendation.

There is no evidence that the ASWB exams effectively measure competence, nor has it been established that passing the exam protects the safety of the public. Rather, the exam has been used to exclude competent social workers from historically marginalized identities, contributing to the social worker shortage in Maryland. This shortage is particularly marked within Communities of Color where cultural connection and cultural humility contribute to greater outcomes for clients. Creating a pathway that allows these dedicated professionals to practice will benefit the citizens of Maryland and the social work profession.

Social workers who fail the exam experience significant financial penalties in the form of additional testing fees, delayed and lost job opportunities, and lower salaries. The University of Maryland School of Social Work educates the majority of social workers in Maryland and has a diverse student population. All our students engage in rigorous coursework and must complete the program with a 3.0 grade point average or better; most students have a significantly higher GPA. They engage in field practicum experiences which provide in-depth training under the supervision of experienced social workers. Our program is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) which requires us to regularly assess our students' achievement in core social work practice competencies. Our MSW students all receive the same educational opportunities at our school, yet the difference in pass rates for students who are Black, Brown, older, or whose first language is not English is marked – this is true in MSW

programs across the state and across the country. If students receive the same education, yet students pass at substantially lower rates correlated with their social identities, there are few options to explain the disparity. Either we can accept that the exam has cultural bias and benefits those from majority identities, or we can accept the alternative, which is that Black students (and others who fail at disproportionate rates) are less competent practitioners. We hope that we can all agree that the latter is preposterous and can commit to fixing the inherent issues with the exam, or creating another, equitable, pathway to licensure.

Again, we support SB0379 as written. We are committed to working together to ensure that all social workers can practice the profession that they have chosen and worked tirelessly to gain the necessary education and experience. Thank you for your consideration.

Dawn Shafer, PhD, LCSW-C  
Associate Dean, Student Affairs

Amanda Lehning, PhD, MSW  
Senior Associate Dean, Academic Affairs

Temeka Bailey, PhD, LCSW-C  
Director, SWCOS Student Education