

January 31, 2025

Testimony to the Maryland General Assembly for Bill SB379

Dear Maryland General Assembly,

My name is Dr. Ellen Schaefer-Salins and I am an Associate Social Work Professor from Salisbury University. I am also a mental health therapist who has worked in Maryland, and the Washington, DC area for 40 years, providing mental health therapy to deaf and hard of hearing individuals. In the past I have worked at many agencies that serve deaf and hard of hearing clients, and I was an adjunct professor at Gallaudet University.

I am testifying about the ASWB Social Work Licensing exam due to my years of work in the deaf community working with skilled deaf and hard of hearing professionals with social work degrees. Many of these professionals have had difficulty passing the social work licensing exam and would take the exam 5 to 10 times before passing. Or many would not take the exam at all due to fear, or give up on passing the exam after many failed attempts. For many years, I was a consultant at an agency working with clients who were deaf and chronically mentally ill, signing off on paperwork because I am a licensed clinical social worker. Many employees with social work degrees and years of experience at the agency were not licensed and could not sign off on the work that they completed.

After years of seeing this pain and discrimination toward my friends and co-workers, I developed a course at Gallaudet University, to teach people how to pass the ASWB Social Work Licensure Exam. I also tutored several deaf individuals through the years on how to pass the exam. The Gallaudet University course and my tutoring focused some on the content of the test looking at social work practice skills, ethics, and more. But the bulk of the class was teaching people how to understand the questions and how to pick the correct answer. We focused on learning social work vocabulary and how to decipher the questions and understand the nuances of English. I was teaching more about English than social work skills!

The people in the course already had the social work skills and knowledge. But many did not have the test taking skills or an understanding of questions with complicated English. The test should be testing for social work skills. Seeing these very intelligent and skilled people failing the test was sad and infuriating. This course was first offered in 2004, more than 20 years ago. So we have

known the “hearing and ableist” bias of the test for a very long time. I worked with a team of professors from Gallaudet University talking to people at ASWB about these issues. After many discussions, nothing changed with the way the questions are written on the test.

When the statistics on the pass rates were released by ASWB, I was disappointed that there were no statistics on people who are deaf or have a variety of disabilities. Many people who are deaf, people who have learning disabilities, or people who know English as a second language, request extended time to take the exam. Their reason for extended time must be approved by ASWB. This means that an individual will have 6 hours to take the exam instead of 4 which gives a test taker more time to review the questions. It would be easy to show the pass rates of anyone asking for extended time, but these statistics were not shown.

As you hear testimony about how the ASWB Social Work Licensure Exam is racially biased, please also consider how it is biased toward the deaf community and the disability community and how they have been trying to address this for many years without any changes in the exam. The exam must be changed to become fair to all and to test for social work skills and knowledge!

I am asking that you codify the workgroup recommendations on the ASWB exam and vote YES for SB0379. This bill will create a more equitable path toward licensure for all and especially for people in the deaf and disability communities.

Thank you for your time reading this testimony.

Sincerely,

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