
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 379

State Board of Social Work Examiners - Membership and Examination Requirements

Finance Committee

February 4, 2025

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports SB 379, which will repeal the examination requirements for bachelor and master social worker licenses, and add two consumer members to the State Board of Social Work Examiners. This legislation would help address the growing need for social workers by removing unnecessary barriers, and make the social work profession more accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

There is no evidence the social work licensing exams assess competency or safety.¹

The racial and other disparities in licensure exam passage rates, obviously, are not indicative of the lack of competency or safety among groups with lower passage rates; else groups that pass at lower rates would have to be less competent or less safe. In Maryland, disparities are evident when comparing the pass rates of students from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) on the LMSW exam. As of 2023, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, School of Social Work (UMSSW) excels with a 79.8% first-time pass rate, while Morgan State University, an HBCU, has a significantly lower first-time pass rate at 31.6%.² We cannot believe that the students of PWIs are more than twice as competent or safe at serving the needs of Baltimore's residents and communities than the students of HBCUs. In states that have removed the licensure exam requirement – such as Illinois, Rhode Island, and Connecticut – there has been no statistically significant increase in disciplinary actions. **There is, however, ample evidence of the harm caused by the exams – both on those who repeatedly fail the exams and on those whose needs they might be serving.³**

The examination perpetuates inequality and is a barrier to a diverse, knowledgeable workforce that is representative of the Marylanders served by social workers. The inequities in exam passage rates mean that organizations and providers struggle to hire social workers who share the same histories and identities as the families and individuals they serve, which is a massive disservice to individuals who seek care, to marginalized communities, and to our state overall. For instance, 12% of Maryland's

¹ Caldwell, B.E. & Rousmaniere, T. (2022). Clinical licensing exams in mental health care. <https://www.psychotherapynotes.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Clinical-Licensing-Exams-in-Mental-Health-Care-October-2022.pdf>.

² Association of Social Work Boards. (2023). Exam pass rates. <https://www.aswb.org/exam/exam-scoring/exam-pass-rates/>.

³ Castex, G., Senreich, E., Phillips, N. K., Miller, C. M., & Mazza, C. (2019). Microaggressions and racial privilege within the social work profession: The social work licensing examinations. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 28(2), 211-228. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15313204.2018.1555498>.

population identifies as Hispanic or Latine, but every county in the state has a massive shortfall of Spanish-speaking social workers, and the disparities in exam passage for test takers whose first language isn't English exacerbate this unmet need.⁴

Reducing barriers to licensure will grow the behavioral health workforce. Maryland is facing a significant shortage of behavioral health professionals as 18,200 more workers are needed just to meet today's demand. By 2028, Maryland needs to double the current size of the state's behavioral health workforce.⁵ Removing the licensing exam would allow for more MSW graduates to enter into the behavioral health workforce pipeline with an LMSW, where they will practice under the license and guidance of an LCSW or LCSW-C who is a licensed supervisor in the state. This will help to alleviate the pressure of the workforce shortfall, like in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), where the district is unable to hire more social workers due to the lack of available licensed professionals.⁶

SB 379 will help alleviate the financial strain on low-income individuals seeking to enter the social work profession. The costs associated with obtaining licensure can be prohibitively expensive, especially for students managing fieldwork, coursework, and the pressures of daily life. By reducing financial and structural barriers like exam fees, which some people have to pay over and over again, SB 379 makes obtaining licensure more accessible to individuals with financial hardship. While schools like the UMSSW are trying to overcome this challenge through programs like the new *Bridging Success Scholarship*,⁷ which covers the \$100 LMSW registration fee for some students, such programmatic interventions do not address the policy problem. Only the Maryland General Assembly can do this. You recognized these disparities and shortages, as well as the need for reform, when you established a workgroup to assess and address these problems, and **the Social Work Licensure Workgroup, which has met since 2023, overwhelmingly recommended the provisions in SB 379. Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly encourages the Committee to follow the recommendations of the Workgroup and urges a favorable report on SB 379.**

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

⁴ Maryland Health Care Commission. October 2024. *Investing in Maryland's Behavioral Health Talent*. https://marylandmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Full-Report_Maryland-BH-Workforce-Assessment-Final-Oct-2024.pdf

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The MoCo Student. (October 27, 2023). *Strain in MCPS mental health resources from shortages of social workers*. The MoCo Student. <https://mocostudent.org/2023/10/strain-in-mcps-mental-health-resources-from-shortages-of-social-workers/>

⁷ University of Maryland School of Social Work (Jan 27, 2025). The Elm. <https://elm.umaryland.edu/announcements/2025/The-Bridging-Success-Scholarship-Launched.php>