
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1521

State Board of Social Work Examiners – Membership and Examination Requirements

Health and Government Operations Committee

March 13, 2025

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports HB 1521 as introduced, 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 making the social work profession more accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences. **HB 1521 is the result and overwhelming recommendation of the Social Work Licensure Workgroup, which the General Assembly – and this Committee, in particular – created to address disparities and workforce shortages in social work.**

There is no compelling evidence to suggest that the social work licensing exams effectively measure competency or ensure safety.¹ The disparities in exam passage rates, particularly across racial and institutional lines, do not indicate that certain groups are less competent or less safe. In Maryland, these disparities are evident when comparing the pass rates of students from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As of 2023, the University of Maryland School of Social Work, a PWI, boasts a high first-time pass rate of 79.8%, while Morgan State University, an HBCU, has a significantly lower pass rate of 31.6%.² We cannot believe that the students of PWIs are more than twice as competent or safe at serving the needs of Baltimoreans and Marylanders as the students of HBCUs. **This disparity is not a reflection of the students' competence or safety but rather a symptom of the inequities in the establishment of the licensure exam and profession.** Illinois, Rhode Island, and Connecticut have removed the licensure exam requirement and have not seen any statistically significant increase in disciplinary actions, further challenging the notion that the exam is an essential measure of a social worker's competency or public safety.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 further hinder organizations and providers that struggle to hire social workers who reflect the same histories and identities as the individuals, families, and communities they serve, which is a disservice to individuals who seek care, marginalized communities, and the state overall. For instance, 12% of Maryland's population identifies as Hispanic or Latine, but every county in the state has a significant shortfall of Spanish-speaking social workers. The disparities in exam passage for test takers whose native language is not English exacerbate this unmet need.⁴ Additionally, the exam creates substantial barriers for

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>.

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

individuals in the deaf, blind, and hard-of-hearing community who may struggle with test accessibility, such as the need to process questions in a different language or format. Thus, removing the exam requirement will not lower the standard of care; instead, it will broaden the pool of diverse, qualified social workers who can serve our communities under the supervision of licensed professionals.

Reducing barriers to licensure will make the profession more accessible, allowing Maryland to build a more diverse and representative social work workforce. There is a significant shortage of behavioral health professionals in the state, as 18,200 more workers are needed just to meet today's demand, and this shortfall disproportionately affects underserved communities. 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 the behavioral health workforce pipeline with an LMSW, where they will then practice under the license and guidance of an LCSW or LCSW-C who has been approved by the Maryland Board of Social Work Examiners. Numerous organizations across Maryland are eager to hire diverse, qualified LMSWs, but are unable to do so as demand far exceeds supply. Removing the exam requirement can alleviate this unmet need and ensure there will not be a "two-tiered system" of social workers, as it is a worker's market for LMSWs. This will also help alleviate the pressure of the workforce shortage, like in Montgomery County Public Schools, where the district is unable to hire more social workers due to the lack of available licensed professionals.⁶

HB 1521 will help ease the financial burdens imposed by the current licensure process on aspiring social workers. Exam fees, preparation costs, and the need to repeatedly retake exams create significant barriers, particularly for low-income individuals already facing the financial demands of coursework, fieldwork, and daily living expenses. By eliminating these financial obstacles, HB 1521 will provide individuals from all backgrounds with a fair opportunity to pursue a career in social work, ultimately benefiting both the social workers and the communities they serve. While institutions like UMSSW are attempting to address this challenge through programmatic solutions,⁷ these efforts do not resolve the underlying policy issue – only the Maryland General Assembly can do so. The General Assembly recognized the longstanding disparities and workforce shortages in social work, as well as the need for reform, and established the Social Work Licensure Workgroup in 2023. HB 1521 follows the recommendations of that workgroup, acknowledging Maryland's social work profession must evolve to meet the diverse needs of its individuals, families, and communities. Those that create and profit from the exams and the resulting inequities and barriers cannot be trusted to act to address these problems when, for so long, they have failed to do so. **Social Work Advocates for Social Change encourages the Committee to follow the recommendations of the Workgroup and urges a favorable report on HB 1521.**

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.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The MoCo Student. (October 27, 2023). *Strain in MCPS mental health resources from shortages of social workers*. The MoCo Student. <https://moco student.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>