Dear Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee,

I am writing to ask that you please codify workgroup recommendations and support HB 1521 to help bring meaningful change to Maryland's social work licensing process. This bill is a step toward a more equitable and compassionate system, one that acknowledges the struggles faced by too many qualified social workers who are unjustly barred from practicing due to a biased and outdated exam system.

The data shared by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) in 2022 paints a troubling picture—one that is hard to ignore. Social work licensing exams show a deep racial and age-based disparity. White candidates pass at rates of 84%, while Black candidates pass at just 45%, and Hispanic candidates at 64%. These numbers are not a reflection of competence, but of systemic barriers that have no place in today's society. These disparities are not just statistics—they represent real people who are being denied the opportunity to serve their communities because of a biased test that does not measure the qualities essential to being an effective social worker.

The recent 2023 workgroup on social work licensing, formed by the Maryland legislature, found that eliminating the exam requirement at both the Bachelor's (LBSW) and Master's (LMSW) levels is the right way forward for our state. For many social workers, particularly from marginalized communities, this exam is an impossible barrier—one that stands between them and their communities. If all demographic groups passed at the same rate as white candidates, Maryland would have 1,227 more licensed social workers. Imagine the profound impact those 1,227 social workers could have, especially in underserved areas where help is needed most.

Social workers in Maryland, especially those at the LBSW and LMSW levels, are the ones providing critical care in hospitals, mental health centers, foster care systems, and beyond. They are the unsung heroes of our social services. Yet, their potential is stifled by an exam that does nothing to measure their real-world skills or their ability to connect with those in need. The diverse social workers we need to represent our communities cannot be reduced to a score on an arbitrary test. Clients, especially from BIPOC and other underserved groups, deserve to see social workers who reflect their lived experiences, because we know that a more diverse workforce improves outcomes and promotes cultural humility.

Moreover, the financial burden of these exams is another profound injustice. For many, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, the costs of retaking the exam multiple times can be devastating—further delaying their ability to serve their communities and perpetuating existing inequalities. No one should be forced to choose between their career and financial security, but this exam system leaves too many people with that impossible decision.

I stand alongside many other states that have already removed or reduced the role of these harmful exams. Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota, and others have proven that it is possible to remove this barrier without jeopardizing public safety or the quality of social work services. In fact, Illinois, which has the longest experience with exam removal, has seen zero increase in sanctions against social workers. Removing the exam does not endanger the public—it enhances our workforce, making it more diverse, compassionate, and better equipped to meet the needs of every Marylander.

In this fight, we must not forget that this issue is not just about policies or procedures. It's about real people—social workers who are passionate, dedicated, and ready to make a difference. They deserve a fair chance to do so. I ask that you consider the weight of their voices, the lives they can change, and the communities they can heal. Please, pass HB 1521 and give Maryland's social workers the tools they need to do the work we so desperately need them to do.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration of this important legislation.

Sincerely,
August Page, MSW Candidate
District 43A