



March 13, 2025

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 1521 – State Board of Social Work Examiners - Membership and Examination Requirements

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 100,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore strongly supports HB1521 – State Board of Social Work Examiners - Membership and Examination Requirements. This bill would implement recommendations from the Maryland Workgroup on Social Worker Requirements for Licensure to eliminate exam requirements for lower-level social work licenses. This would help address shocking racial disparities in social work licensure exam passage and address our state’s behavioral health workforce shortage.

Maryland faces a severe behavioral health workforce shortage. A recent comprehensive analysis found that there were 2,799 social workers employed in behavioral health settings in Maryland and that an additional 2,675 would be needed by 2028 to meet the state’s needs. The report also showed that Black behavioral health professionals are overrepresented in lower-income, unlicensed positions.¹ More must be done to address the shortage overall and to expand opportunities for people of color.

This is even more urgent when considering the dramatic disparities in social work licensure exam passage. The Association of Social Work Boards released data on exam passage rates broken down by race for the first time in 2022 and the data was disturbing. The data showed that only half of Black master’s level applicants ever pass the exam while over 90% of their white counterparts do. At the bachelor’s level, only 38% of Black applicants ever pass the exam compared to 82% of their white counterparts.² Thousands of potential social work professionals who were unable to pass the licensure exam have either left the field entirely or work at paraprofessional, unlicensed level despite their education. This represents a terrible inequity that has led to an unrepresentative social work field.

HB1521 represents a commonsense proposal to increase the number of licensed social workers and social workers of color by eliminating the requirement to pass an exam for the LBSW and LMSW licenses. The exam requirement is retained for the LCSW-C license, the most advanced social work license. BHSB supports this effort to help address disparities in Baltimore where white licensed social workers are overrepresented compared to the racial makeup of the city as a whole or the populations generally served.

The state of Illinois passed a similar bill that went into effect in 2022, and the number of social workers licensed at the lower level doubled from about 5,000 to 10,000 professionals in just two years. This expansion was achieved without any increase in sanctions or complaints regarding licensed social workers in the state. Maryland could achieve a similar expansion of our social work workforce, addressing our workforce challenges without any cost to the state.

This legislation is a reasonable approach to address the disparities in Maryland’s social work profession and our workforce shortage overall. It is the result of over two years of deliberation from the Maryland Workgroup on Social Worker Requirements for Licensure. **We urge the House Health and Government Operations Committee to accept the Workgroup’s recommendations and support HB1521 to address inequity in the social work field.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142

Endnotes:

¹ Maryland Health Care Commission. Investing in Maryland’s Behavioral Health Talent. October 2024. https://mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/pages/plr/plr/documents/2024/md_bh_workforce_rpt_SB283.pdf

² 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis. Available at <https://health.maryland.gov/workgroup-swrl/Documents/2022%20AWSB%20Pass%20Rates%20and%20Analysis.pdf>