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**HB1521: State Board of Social Work Examiners - Membership and Examination Requirements  
Position: Favorable**

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the HGO Committee,

My name is Michael Massey and I am a resident of District 18 and am a Professor of Social Work at Catholic University (my testimony reflects my personal views). I am writing to request that you find a favorable report for HB1521. Two years ago, you helped pass legislation to convene a workgroup of diverse voices within social work to study the issue of social work licensure and make recommendations. After careful consideration of the evidence, they submitted their report. Following the Workgroup's recommendations, HB1521 will increase accountability to the Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) by adding two more consumer members and it will safely add qualified social workers to the workforce, which both helps address our mental health workforce shortage and contributes to a more robust Maryland economy.

**Increasing and Diversifying our Workforce: Good for Mental and Economic Health**

Right now, licensure exam requirements are keeping thousands of qualified and ready social workers from serving their communities. We know this because the organization who creates and administers the national exam, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), final—after 40 years of testing—released demographic exam outcome data. The results were worse than we thought—there are huge racial and other disparities that have allowed most white social work graduates to enter the field and left many social workers of Color out in the cold. From 2011-2021, white test-takers in Maryland passed the Masters level exam at a first-time rate of 93%, while Black test-takers passed at 56% rate and Hispanic/Latinos at a 79% rate. Clinical exam pass rates are similar, with rates of 89%, 54%, and 66% respectively. We've done the math. If all exam-takers in Maryland passed at the white pass rates during 2011-2021, we would have over 1200 more licensed social workers. Increasing and diversifying our social work workforce would be an incredible boon for the citizens of Maryland and the state's overall economic, mental, and physical health.

**Following the Evidence: HB1521 is an Evidence-Based, Commonsense Policy**

As a committed and responsible lawmaker, I am certain that you want to pass legislation that is rooted in solid evidence. Fortunately, if you look at the existing evidence (and where evidence is lacking), you will find that HB1521 is overwhelmingly evidence-based. Here is a summary:

**What the Evidence Says:**

- **Passing HB1521 would immediately add more qualified social workers to the Maryland workforce.** Other states that have passed similar measures have seen huge increases in licensed social workers. Illinois removed the exam requirement for the LSW (LMSW in MD)

license in 2021, and added nearly 5000 LSWs by the end of 2023, nearly doubling the workforce at that level. Rhode Island did the same in 2022 and more than doubled their number of LCSWs (LMSW in MD) from 2021 to 2022. In Connecticut, total Masters level licensed social workers went from 3812 in 2022 to 5104 in 2023 (bill was passed in mid-2023), a 34% increase.

- **Passing HB1521 poses no risk to the public.** I collected publicly available data on social work disciplinary sanctions in Illinois, Rhode Island, and Connecticut to see if eliminating the exams may contribute to more discipline or ethical violations. The answer is definitively, “No.”
  - In Illinois, approximately .04% of LSWs were sanctioned in the three years before the masters exam was eliminated compared to only .08% in the years after, meaning there was no substantive increase in disciplinary sanctions. Importantly, the very small increase in sanctions after the policy enactment was not caused by social workers who did not take the exam, since all of the sanctioned social workers were licensed before the bill went into effect.
  - In Rhode Island, there have been only two total disciplinary sanctions since law went into effect in 2022.
  - In Connecticut, in the 2.5 years since the law was passed, there were 7 total disciplinary hearings for Masters level licensees, compared to 4 in the 2.5 years prior to the bill. Given the increase in numbers of licensees, this represents a near 0% increase.
- **The enormous racial and other disparities found in the exam outcome data indicate substantial bias, keeping large numbers of qualified social workers from going to work for Maryland citizens.** [Even research that the ASWB recently sponsored](#) found that exam results are likely impacted by factors other than social work competence, indicating what is called construct-irrelevant variance, which threatens exam validity. [Other research](#) has conclusively shown that ASWB doesn't follow the psychometric standards that they claim to. The National Association of Social Workers, our most prominent national professional organization, stated in October 2022, “The current exam does not conform with industry testing standards. Further, there is no evidence that the exam ensures competence or prevents misconduct or unethical practice. We cannot support exam requirements that result in unnecessary gatekeeping and discrimination.” This could not be any clearer.
- **Research suggests that the social work exams are not valid indicators of social work competence.** [Research](#) going back to the 1980s has raised questions about the exam's validity. In 1994, [Randall and Thyer](#) released a study using practice clinical exams that demonstrated huge validity problems. 16 years later, [Albright & Thyer](#) conducted a similar study on new exams and found the same issues! [Recent research](#) has found racial and other microaggressions embedded in test questions. In a 2022 [white paper](#) that examines clinical exams for Psychology, Clinical Social Work, Counseling, and Marriage and Family Counseling, Caldwell and Rousmaniere, found that “After more than 50 years of use, there remains no evidence that clinical exams in mental health care improve the quality or safety of that care.” Most recently, [Victor and colleagues](#) used artificial intelligence to answer exam questions and found major problems related to construct validity. Among many interesting

findings was that, for several questions, the AI technology was able to generate reasoned and convincing arguments as to why the answer considered “correct” by ASWB was not the best answer.

In response to the concerns about the outcome data and validity, ASWB has announced that it is making superficial changes to the exams in 2025, the most notable of which is changing some questions to three multiple choice answer options instead of four. This change has no basis in research at all! It is a way to convince lawmakers and the public that they are doing something to address the previous forty years of consumer fraud. I hope you will not accept that these changes are being made in good faith. It is simply another part of their ongoing strategy of [denial](#), [deflection](#), and [deception](#).

### **What the Evidence Does Not Say:**

- **There is no evidence that the social work Masters and Bachelors exams have any relationship to social work competence or safe practice.** In over forty years of testing, neither ASWB nor anyone else has provided evidence that passing the exam has any relationship to better or more ethical practice. When I contacted ASWB about this, they sent me a link to their website, which offers no evidence of the kind. In the Maryland Senate Finance Committee [hearing on 2/4/25](#), ASWB’s CEO confirmed that there is no peer-reviewed research that makes any connection between the exams and competent practice (2:02:00). It makes no sense to continue to require an exam that is so clearly biased and appears to be doing nothing.
- **There is no evidence that eliminating the exam requirement at the Bachelors and Masters levels leads to a “two-tiered” licensing system.** No states that have passed similar laws have experience this issue. In fact, when [Joel Ruben, Executive Director of NASW’s Illinois chapter](#) presented to the workgroup, he was asked if licensed social workers who didn’t take the exam are seen as “less than” in the practice community. He answered, quite succinctly, “No, I don’t. A license is a license” (1:09:10). In fact, Maryland still has practicing social workers who were grandfathered into licensure without taking the exam and they have had long, successful careers.

As a social work professor at Catholic University, I have seen excellent students graduate and immediately stagnate as they are denied jobs that they are qualified for. They put in the work and demonstrated time and again that they are ready to do the difficult and nuanced work that the job demands. Many of these students, who are mostly Black, want to go back to their own communities and serve people with whom they share background and culture. Yet, an exam that is unsupported by evidence keeps them from doing so. And we all are lesser for it. I urge you to return a favorable vote on HB1521 and put more social workers to work. It is a sensible investment in Maryland’s mental and economic health.