

Testimony in Support of HB1521

House Health and Government Operations Committee

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Amber Flanigan, and I stand before you not only as a graduate with a Master's Degree in Social Work from Morgan State University, where I earned a 4.0 GPA, but as a black woman who has worked tirelessly to achieve her dream of becoming a licensed social worker, only to be repeatedly blocked by a system designed to prevent me from accomplishing what I am not only capable of, but undeniably qualified to achieve.

I have taken the ASWB Master's Exam five times, and each time, I have failed by just a few points. Each attempt was not just a test, it was a moment filled with hope, anxiety, and the weight of knowing that my future depended on a system that was never built for people like me to succeed. Despite my strong academic background, I have found myself questioning my worth and my place in the social work field, not because I lack the ability, but because this exam fails to recognize my competence.

But this is bigger than me. The racial disparities in ASWB exam pass rates prove what I, and so many other **black, brown, and disabled aspiring social workers**, have felt firsthand: this test is not a fair measure of our ability to serve our communities. It is a barrier, a gatekeeper that stands in the way of people who have the knowledge, the skills, and the passion to make a difference. We are being told we are not good enough, not because we lack the ability, but because of a deeply flawed, discriminatory system that continues to fail us.

The emotional toll of this experience has been unbearable. I have invested years of my life, thousands of dollars, and every ounce of my energy into this dream, only to be blocked by an outdated, biased exam. I have had to seek therapy just to cope with the overwhelming stress and self-doubt this has created. And yet, I know I am not alone. Too many qualified black social workers are stuck in this same cycle, watching their futures slip away while communities desperately need professionals who look like them, understand them, and can truly serve them.

This injustice is not just personal, it has real consequences for the communities we aim to serve. Each day that I and others like me are unable to practice is a day that vulnerable populations go without the care and representation they need. We know that people from marginalized communities are often most in need of social workers who can relate to their lived experiences, and this test continues to deny those communities the professionals they deserve.

We cannot continue to allow this injustice to persist. The NASW Code of Ethics calls on social workers to **challenge social injustice and to serve all people with dignity and respect, regardless of race or background**. But how can we uphold this ethical responsibility when the system meant to license us is working against us?

I urge you to pass HB1521 and take a decisive stand against this discriminatory barrier. Removing this licensure exam will create a more equitable and just pathway for social workers, especially people of color, to enter the profession and serve their communities. A pathway that acknowledges our education, experience, and capacity to serve. I am ready to do the work, and I have always been ready. It is time for the system to finally support us, just as we are expected to support those in need.

While my journey has been challenging, my dedication to this profession and my community has never wavered. I am not asking for a favor but for the opportunity to serve where I am needed most, alongside other qualified professionals who share my vision for change.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Amber Flanigan