

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Stacey Owens, and I am a licensed social worker residing in Baltimore City. I submit this written testimony in strong opposition to Maryland Senate Bill 18 (SB 18).

SB 18 would weaken Maryland's social work licensing standards by removing the requirement of an exam, which is a key requirement for social work licensure. If enacted, this bill would allow individuals to practice social work without demonstrating minimum competency through a standardized exam, putting public protection at risk and undermining the professional standing of social workers across the state.

Consumers in Maryland deserve to be supported by social workers who meet the same professional standards as social workers in other states. Even nursing assistants and massage therapists are required to take an exam, the functions that bachelors and masters social workers perform are no less valuable and should also have standards. Removing standards for practice is especially concerning in a field that often serves people who are vulnerable.

I understand that the reason behind proposing SB 18 is to increase the social work workforce. However, I urge you to consider the unintended consequences. Reducing licensure requirements diminishes parity with other health professions, threatens eligibility for licensure portability, and devalues the profession of social work.

I also understand concerns about exam pass rates by race. ASWB voluntarily released its own pass rate data as a baseline for looking at disparities as we all collectively work toward equity. However, removing a licensing requirement does not embody equity. In fact, it is in opposition to the principles of equity. A systematic widespread approach to supporting social workers in meeting professional standards would be the equitable response.

We must ask ourselves why we have not asked other health professions to release their exam pass rate data, or why they have not released their data voluntarily. We must ask ourselves if this scenario presented itself with nurses or physicians, would the state of Maryland be in support of reducing licensure requirements for physicians? And if not, why is the state of Maryland supporting reducing licensure requirements for social workers. Social work is also a valuable health profession that impacts lives.

Unfortunately there are also widespread misconceptions about how the social work licensing exam is created. Information is available on ASWB's website (specifically the Measuring Social Work Competence page and the Exam Program Yearbook) that provides information about the process, and the people involved in the process. I am a Maryland resident, and I have personally been involved in the exam development process as a volunteer and consultant for 17 years. Each question is written and submitted by a

practicing social worker, supported by a social work reference textbook/publication, approved by a group of practicing social workers, and psychometrically validated before it's ever used as a scored question on the exam.

An exam is a critical licensure component that differentiates professional practice from lay practice. Maryland's social work licensure system exists to protect the public and uphold the integrity of the profession. SB 18 moves the state in the wrong direction by lowering standards rather than strengthening the workforce through meaningful, evidence-based, equitable approaches.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to oppose Senate Bill 18.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacey Owens, BSW, MSW, LCSW-C