

Michael Massey, PhD, MSW, M.Ed., Assistant Professor, Catholic University of America

**SB18: State Board of Social Work Examiners - Conditional License to Practice Social Work
- Revisions
Position: Favorable with Amendments**

Dear Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Michael Massey and I am a resident of District 18 and 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 SB18 with amendments (listed below). SB18 safely and thoughtfully adds qualified social workers to the workforce, helping to address our mental health workforce shortage and contributing to a more robust Maryland economy.

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

Based on data released by the Association of Social Work Board (ASWB), licensure exam requirements continue to keep thousands of qualified and ready social workers from serving their communities, despite **no** evidence to support the exams as a meaningful measure of competence or work readiness. Every year we wait on this issue, Maryland continues to lose qualified professionals and the needs of Maryland citizens go unmet. According to the Maryland Behavioral Health Workforce Assessment, "...70% [of] Masters of Social Work and Clinical and Counseling Psychology graduates from Maryland universities since 2014 were either working in other industries in Maryland, were employed out of state, or not working one year after degree completion" (p. 4). The report also estimates that Maryland needs 2,675 additional social workers in behavioral health settings alone to meet current demand (p. 31). SB18 immediately and safely responds to these issues.

What the Evidence Says:

- **Passing SB18 would immediately add more qualified social workers to the Maryland workforce.**

I am working in partnership with the Washington DC Department of Health to evaluate a recently passed bill that allows for a non-exam pathway for LGSW licensure (equivalent to LMSW in Maryland). Preliminary data shows that in less than two months, DC has seen an 18% increase in LGSW licensees and agencies that were previously unable to fill their employment needs are reporting that they are now able to do so.

Importantly, 58% of the new licensees taking the non-exam pathway are from Maryland, which means that Maryland is losing its essential workforce. For years, Virginia has not required an exam to enter the social work workforce and was already siphoning off social workers from Maryland and DC. It is unwise to let this trend continue.

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. Recently, [they announced that Illinois has over 30,000](#) social workers, a huge milestone that was achieved by removing exam barriers. Rhode more than doubled their number of LCSWs (LMSW in MD) within a year of removing the exam requirement. 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 SB18 poses no risk to the public.** Last year, 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. Additionally, the very small increase in sanctions after the policy enactment was not caused by social workers who did not take the exam.
 - In Rhode Island, there had 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.

In order to increase clarity, more consistent implementation, and ensure that we avoid a two-tiered license system, please consider the following amendments:

- Rename the alternative pathway “Practice-Based Licensure” to accurately reflect that it confers all full professional rights and responsibilities of social work licensure.
- Allow up to four years to complete the required 1,500 hours of supervised practice. This flexibility recognizes common life circumstances that may temporarily affect hours worked while maintaining the total supervision requirement.
- Ensure supervisor responsibilities are identical for both practice-based and examination pathways.
- Specific language that allows supervised practice hours accrued during this period to count toward future independent licensure requirements.
- Maintain confidentiality of pathway status between the licensee and the Board.
- Require annual BSWE reporting on licensure numbers and disciplinary outcomes by pathway to support transparent, data-driven evaluation of the policy’s impact.

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 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 SB18 and put more social workers to work. It is a sensible investment in Maryland’s mental and economic health.