

N. Bell – Licensure Statement in Support of SB0018 (March 2025)

Hello, my name is Ninah Bell, and I am a master’s level social worker and current PhD candidate in Social Work at Morgan State University. I am an unlicensed macro social worker with expertise in program development, program management, and direct and indirect practice with youth, returning citizens, and victims of domestic and sexual violence. I have dedicated over 20 years to this field. I hold a dual BA from Temple University in Journalism and African American Studies and earned my MSW with a concentration in nonprofit leadership and social innovation from the University of Southern California, where I graduated *summa cum laude*. By the time I completed my MSW in 2019, I had already been active in the field for more than a decade.

I am writing to express my strong support for **Senate Bill 0018 (SB0018)** and Maryland’s efforts to modernize the social work licensure process. SB0018 represents a necessary and timely step toward addressing longstanding inequities embedded in licensure systems while strengthening Maryland’s behavioral health and social services workforce.

Throughout my career, I made a conscious decision not to pursue licensure—not because I lack the intellectual capacity, professional competence, or ability to pass the licensure examination, but because I have been resistant to participating in a system that has historically and systemically impeded the advancement of Black social workers. SB0018 directly responds to these realities by creating space for alternative pathways to licensure that better recognize demonstrated competence, academic achievement, and practical application.

Despite my education, experience, and proven impact, I have repeatedly been denied opportunities for roles for which I was overqualified solely because I did not hold an LMSW. For Black social workers—particularly Black women—the absence of licensure often becomes a proxy for assumptions about competence, professionalism, and worth. SB0018 acknowledges that the current system does not operate equitably and that reform is required to ensure retention and upward mobility for qualified practitioners already serving Maryland communities.

In 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released data demonstrating stark racial disparities in licensure exam pass rates. First-time pass rates for white candidates were approximately 84%, compared to only 45% for Black candidates and 64% for Hispanic candidates. These disparities are neither incidental nor new. They reflect a testing structure grounded in Eurocentric norms that disproportionately disadvantages Black and other social workers of color. SB0018 provides a pathway to disrupt this cycle by reducing overreliance on a single, inequitable assessment mechanism.

Within professional networks of Black social workers, it is common to encounter highly educated and experienced practitioners—many of whom are graduates of accredited institutions such as **Morgan State University**, a leading HBCU—who narrowly fail the licensure exam despite strong academic records and extensive practice experience. The emotional and financial toll of repeated testing, preparation courses, and exam fees contributes to burnout, workforce attrition, and economic instability. SB0018 offers an opportunity to retain these practitioners rather than pushing them out of the profession entirely.

As we recognize Social Work Month and Women’s History Month, it is critical to examine how current licensure practices disproportionately harm Black women, who are overrepresented in the social work

workforce yet underrepresented in leadership and higher-paying roles. This harm is being compounded by the current federal administration's policy priorities and severe budget cuts to social service, public health, education, and nonprofit sectors—fields in which Black women are disproportionately employed. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2024), Black women in Maryland earn \$28,756 less annually than white cisgender men, with pay equity projected to take more than two centuries to achieve. As funding reductions and administrative restructuring lead to layoffs, contract non-renewals, and hiring freezes, Black women social workers without licensure are often among the first to be displaced—regardless of experience or performance. SB0018 is one concrete policy mechanism that can interrupt this pattern by expanding access to employment, leadership, and economic stability. Approval of the alternative pathway outlined in SB0018 would allow experienced, highly educated Black social workers to remain employed, transition into new roles, and compete equitably in a shrinking labor market—rather than being pushed out due to structural barriers unrelated to competence.

Social work professes a commitment to equity, justice, and ethical practice. In the context of widespread federal disinvestment and workforce contraction, maintaining rigid and inequitable licensure barriers actively contributes to the displacement of Black women from the profession at a time when their skills are most needed. Continued reliance on a demonstrably biased licensure exam contradicts these values. **SB0018 aligns Maryland's social work policies with the profession's ethical commitments by recognizing alternative pathways to licensure, valuing demonstrated competence, and promoting workforce sustainability.**

Maryland has positioned itself as a leader in equity-focused policy. Supporting SB0018—and the alternative licensure pathways it authorizes—offers a proactive strategy to stabilize the social work workforce, reduce unnecessary job loss among Black women, and preserve institutional knowledge during a period of fiscal austerity and political uncertainty. By supporting SB0018, the state can model what it means to take equity seriously within the social work profession—ensuring that qualified, experienced, and highly educated Black social workers are not excluded from meaningful employment and advancement due to structural barriers.

Thank you for your consideration and for your leadership on this critical issue. I offer my full support for **Senate Bill 0018 (SB0018)** and urge its passage as a necessary reform to strengthen Maryland's social work workforce and uphold the values our profession claims to champion.