

Dear Members of the Maryland Senate Finance Committee -

My name is Nicky O'Reilly, and I am a social work educator in the State of Maryland. I am writing today in support of SBO018. I began my social work career 25 years ago in rural Pennsylvania. Over the past 15 years, I have worked in higher education across multiple states, including Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Idaho. In each state, the needs of rural communities far outpaced access to social work and psychiatric services, with a recent study reporting that 98% of counties designated as having a shortage of mental health care are rural (Rural Health Information Hub, 2026). Additionally, the rate of mental health diagnosis in rural communities is similar to the rate found in urban communities (Forrest et al., 2023). However, there is less access to service providers in rural settings, and access to specialized mental health services is even more limited. For example, depression and substance use disorder in rural communities are more likely to go untreated than in urban and suburban communities (University of Kentucky College of Social Work, 2025).

Residents of rural communities experience several additional barriers. First, poverty is considerably higher in rural communities when compared to urban and suburban communities (US Department of Agriculture, 2025). Unsurprisingly, access to public transportation is limited in rural settings, and a lack of personal transportation among low-income individuals represents a significant barrier to those who need services. Not only is a lack of transportation higher in rural communities, those who need services must travel greater distances to access those services (Espeland & Rowangould, 2024). Although telehealth has become more common among those seeking mental health care, low-income households are less likely to have reliable internet access and adequate technology.

Although access to social work education among rural residents has increased with greater access to online programming, access to licensure still falls short of the need for licensed social work services. Licensure is an essential component of mental health services, as reimbursement and payment for services requires that a licensed professional be part of the treatment team. However, licensure can be more difficult to access for some graduating students and professionals. Research has consistently shown disproportionality in pass rates for social work licensing exams, with low-income students and students of color less likely to pass, despite overall success as a student and social worker (Bloxom & Anderson, 2023). This is an ongoing issue in social work, with many pushing for drastic change to the licensure model. SBO018 represents an opportunity to improve access to mental health services in rural communities by improving the licensure process. Allowing supervision by a licensed individual to replace the licensing exam will improve access to services in all communities, but especially those most in need. This change will improve access to services without decreasing the quality of services. I ask that you support to SBO018 which will improve access to mental health services across the State of Maryland by increasing the availability of social workers licensed to provide needed services in our communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Nicole L. O'Reilly, PhD, MSSW

References

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