

WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB769
House Health Committee
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Good afternoon, Chair Bagnall, Vice Chair Cullison, and Members of the Committee. My name is Philicia Ross. I am a LCSW-C, graduated with my MSW, and serve as President of SWEAR. I am submitting my written testimony today in strong support of HB769.

SWEAR was founded in 2022 as a grassroots response to ASWB's exam pass rate data showing devastating racial, age, and language disparities. We've grown into a formal 501(c)(6) nonprofit dedicated to dismantling barriers in the Social Work field to strengthen Maryland's workforce. I also served on the SB871 Workgroup for Social Work Licensure Requirements - 23 diverse stakeholders who voted overwhelmingly to recommend removing the ASWB exam requirement for LBSW and LMSW licensure. The only opposition came from ASWB and Board representatives. HB769 implements what 80% of that workgroup determined Maryland needs.

ASWB'S INACTION AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Since releasing pass rate data in August 2022 - after decades of withholding it - ASWB has promised transparency while delivering only opposition. They have not published validity studies showing their exam predicts safe practice. They have not released data for independent research. They have not reformed their exam development process.

What they have done is protect their revenue. ASWB generates substantial income from exam fees (documented in their Form 990) and served as "primary partner" developing the Social Work Compact that mandates their exam as the only "Qualifying National Exam" for multistate licensure. They helped design a system requiring the product they sell.

THE COMPACT CREATES THE TWO-TIER SYSTEM ASWB CLAIMS TO OPPOSE

ASWB argues practice-based pathways create "two different levels of licenses." This is projection. HB769 creates one LMSW license through two pathways - identical practice authority either way.

The Social Work Compact literally creates two classes: Multistate Licenses (practice across 31+ states) and Single State Licenses (restricted to home state). The dividing line? The ASWB exam. Social Workers licensed through practice-based pathways are categorically excluded from Compact privileges.

When Illinois removed the ASWB exam and doubled their workforce with zero disciplinary

increase, they simultaneously created Social Workers who can practice throughout Illinois but cannot access the Compact. Washington State joined the Compact while explicitly acknowledging "the association of Social Work boards licensing test has been shown to have severe disparities in outcomes based on the race, age, and language of test takers." States pursuing equity reforms face a choice: maintain the biased exam for Compact access, or implement alternatives while accepting second-class licensees nationally.

MARYLAND'S URGENT WORKFORCE CRISIS

Maryland needs 2,675 additional Social Workers by 2028 (Maryland Behavioral Health Workforce Assessment, October 2024). We lose 70% of MSW graduates within one year to other industries, states, or unemployment. DC implemented a practice-based pathway in 2024: 18% license increase in 72 days, with 58% of new licensees living in Maryland. We're training Social Workers for jurisdictions that already made these reforms.

COUNTERING ASWB'S CLAIMS

"The exam is the only uniform, objective measure of competence."

In 50+ years, not one study has shown licensing exams in mental health predict safe practice (Caldwell & Rousmaniere, 2022). ASWB has not published validity data correlating their exam with practice outcomes.

"Removing the exam puts clients at risk."

Illinois removed the LSW exam in 2021 and created LCSW alternatives in 2023: workforce more than doubled, zero disciplinary increase. DC's 2024 pathway: zero safety concerns. The exam has never been shown to prevent harm.

"This creates a two-tier system."

HB769 creates one license through two pathways. The Compact creates two classes of licensees divided by ASWB's exam.

"Don't blame the thermometer for the disease."

A thermometer giving different readings based on race isn't measuring temperature - it's measuring bias. When that "thermometer" blocks qualified professionals while generating revenue for those defending it, we don't need a better thermometer. We need to stop using a broken tool for gatekeeping.

WHAT HB769 DOES

HB769 maintains every protection: CSWE-accredited education, 1,500 hours of supervised practice, Board-approved supervision, criminal background checks, continuing education, and full Board disciplinary authority. It does what this field has always done: direct observation of practice by licensed professionals assessing clinical skill, ethical judgment, and cultural

responsiveness.

The bill requires annual Board reporting on licensure outcomes, creating transparency ASWB has failed to provide despite years of promises. HB769 is evidence-based workforce policy implementing a diverse workgroup's recommendations and following successful models in Illinois, DC, and other jurisdictions. It addresses Maryland's documented crisis with a solution that maintains rigorous standards while removing barriers serving no public protection purpose.

I urge a favorable report on HB769.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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