
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 769

State Board of Social Work Examiners - Conditional License to Practice Social Work - Revisions

House Health Committee

February 18, 2026

Social Work Advocates for Social Change supports House Bill 769, which would help to address Maryland’s growing unmet behavioral health needs by enacting a conditional licensure pathway, allowing qualified social workers to enter supervised practice more efficiently while preserving public protection.

Maryland is facing a significant and well-documented shortage of over 30,000 behavioral health professionals to meet growing demand.¹ The Maryland Health Care Commission’s 2024 report, *Investing in Maryland’s Behavioral Health Talent*, projects a shortfall of approximately 32,800 behavioral health workers by 2028.² This report—developed to guide the Behavioral Health Workforce Investment Fund—identifies expansion of the social work workforce as a critical strategy to address this gap. Without meaningful reform, workforce shortages will continue to delay care, strain emergency and hospital systems, and contribute to burnout among existing providers.

The behavioral health workforce shortage exists alongside a broader mental health crisis affecting communities across Maryland. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, many residents experience unmet mental health needs, limited access to care, and long wait times for services.³ These gaps in access disproportionately affect low-income communities, communities of color, and rural areas. When individuals cannot access timely behavioral health care, conditions worsen, crises escalate, and costs increase across state systems. Expanding the social work workforce is essential to stabilizing Maryland’s mental health infrastructure and improving outcomes statewide.

Despite the clear workforce need, current licensure requirements present barriers that delay or prevent qualified social workers from entering practice. National data from the Association of Social Work Boards demonstrate significant racial disparities in exam pass rates, with Black and Latino candidates passing at substantially lower rates than white candidates, even after completing accredited graduate education.⁴ These disparities limit workforce diversity and exclude practitioners who bring lived experience, cultural responsiveness, and community-based knowledge—qualities essential to effective behavioral health care. **HB 769 reduces unnecessary barriers while maintaining accountability, allowing Maryland to retain trained professionals who are ready to serve.**

Other states have demonstrated that licensure reform strengthens—not weakens—the behavioral health workforce. Illinois and Washington, DC have expanded conditional or alternative licensure pathways, resulting in measurable growth in licensed social workers without evidence of harm to client safety or service quality.^{5,6} These reforms offer a proven model for Maryland.

This legislation is a practical, research-supported solution to Maryland’s behavioral health workforce shortage. **By modernizing the conditional licensure process, HB 769 will expand access to care, promote equity within the profession, and help meet the mental health needs of Maryland residents.**

For these reasons, Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on HB 769.



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Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

¹ Brown, D. (2024, December 2). *Maryland needs another 30,000 behavioral health workers to meet growing demand*. Maryland Matters.

² Hall, A., et al. (2024). *Investing in Maryland's behavioral health talent: A needs assessment to inform the design of the behavioral health workforce investment fund established by the Maryland legislature through Senate Bill 283*. Maryland Health Care Commission.

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2025). *Mental health in Maryland: State fact sheet*.

⁴ Association of Social Work Boards. (2022). *2022 ASWB exam pass rates analysis: Final report*.

⁵ National Association of Social Workers-Illinois Chapter. (2024). *Illinois breaks barriers in mental health workforce, achieving remarkable growth in licensed social workers*.

⁶ Timmons, E., Han, L., & Bandoch, J. (2025). *The effect of master's level social worker licensing reform in Illinois*.