

My name is Ninah Bell, I am a PhD candidate in Social Work at Morgan State University, with more than 20 years of macro-level experience proudly serving urban communities, including Harlem, New York; South Jamaica, New York; and Baltimore City, where I have worked for the past six years. I am here today in strong support of HB 0769. Briefly, I want to explain why this matters to me personally. Despite graduating summa cum laude from an accredited MSW program at the University of Southern California and having over a decade of leadership experience at the time of graduation, I was repeatedly screened out of roles I was often overqualified for solely because I did not hold the LMSW title. The issue was never competence or intellectual capacity; it was access. And my experience is not unique—it reflects an often systemic pattern for Black women in this field. Despite being among the most educated in social work, Black women face significant barriers to advancement and pay. In Maryland, they earn on average \$28,756 less per year than white, non-Hispanic peers. On average, Black women social workers in Maryland earn tens of thousands of dollars less annually than their peers, despite similar education, credentials, and years of experience, due to hindered access. Maryland is currently facing a social work workforce shortage, particularly within the non-profit, behavioral health, and social services sectors. At the same time, many Maryland-trained social workers are leaving the state for neighboring regions, such as Washington, DC, which already offers an alternative licensure pathway. HB0769 allows Maryland to retain its talent, expand workforce participation, and remain competitive. I want to be absolutely clear: this bill does not eliminate the licensure exam. It does not change clinical standards, and it has no impact on clinical practice or the clinical licensure exam. HB0769 along with cross-bill SB0818 simply creates an alternative pathway—one that recognizes accredited education and demonstrated professional

competence, rather than relying solely on an exam with documented racial disparities in pass rates. For Black women—who are highly educated, overrepresented in this workforce, and often the first displaced during budget cuts—HB0769 is a concrete policy solution that expands employment, retention, and economic stability. This bill is about workforce sustainability. It is about equity. And it is about aligning Maryland’s policies with the realities of who is doing the work. I respectfully urge your support for the passage of Senate Bill 0018. Thank you for your time and leadership.