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**Testimony of Lavina Harless, LCSW**

**Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services**

**Testifying in OPPOSITION to L.D. 1990**

**An Act To Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by  
Removing the Examination Requirement**

January 25, 2024

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and Respected Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services, my name is Lavina Harless, and I am the Senior Director of Examination Services at the Association of Social Work Boards. I am testifying in opposition to L.D. 1990, An Act To Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement.

The social work licensing exams are an important element of public protection because they assess whether an applicant for a social work license has the minimum competence to practice safely and ethically from the first day on the job. Thank you for the opportunity to tell you more about how the exams are developed, how ASWB guards against bias, and about the initiatives ASWB is undertaking moving forward.

Following nationally recognized test development standards that ensure validity, reliability, and fairness, the process begins with a major survey of thousands of social workers to ensure there is representation from a broad spectrum of backgrounds and geographic areas. A function of the survey is to define the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to be a social worker at each category of practice, including bachelors, masters, and clinical. The content of the current examination is based on feedback from a survey of 23,000 social workers.

ASWB then contracts with a diverse group of 50 to 100 social workers to write questions for the exam based on the content developed through the practice analysis. Writers are selected for racial, ethnic, geographic, and practice area diversity. Every question on an ASWB examination is reviewed by a sensitivity panel of social work subject matter experts and undergoes psychometric analysis for signs of potential bias. It is through these robust processes that the exam is designed.

To aid candidates, ASWB cooperates with the State Board of Social Worker Licensure to make necessary accommodation determinations under all applicable legislation, including but not limited to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). American Sign Language interpretation may be approved as a testing arrangement with options for an ASL interpreter for the entire exam or only before and after the exam to communicate with test center staff. Maine allows arrangements, including extra time and dictionary use, for candidates who use English as a second language.

Next, I'd like to share the initiatives ASWB is undertaking as part of our efforts to update the exams and contribute to the larger conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Research initiatives** include the recently completed Community Conversations, a series of focus groups with social workers about their unique experiences with the licensing exams; the Social Work Census, the largest and most inclusive social work practice analysis and workforce study ever undertaken; and collaborations with Howard University and with Joy Kim, Ph.D., MSW, of Rutgers University to help contextualize and understand the pass rate data published in 2022.

**Exam administration initiatives** include enhancements to the test-taker experience, including phasing in three-option multiple-choice questions, and partnering with a new examination administration vendor whose values around diversity and inclusion match our own.

**Education initiatives** include making a suite of free exam resources available to social work educators, presenting an exam education webinar series to the public, and providing access to the Test Mastery Inclusion program to support candidates who have been unsuccessful on the exam.

**Accessibility initiatives** include addressing financial barriers by developing a scholarship program for repeat test-takers, offering the option for online exam administration through secure remote proctoring, and publishing the next iteration of the exams in French and potentially Spanish.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer questions from the committee and will be available for the work session.

Respectfully,

Lavina Harless

Senior Director of Examination Services

Association of Social Work Boards