

Cynthia Cushing
Readfield
LD 1298

Letter of Support for LD 1298 - An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensing

Dear Senator Bailey, Chair of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Cynthia Cushing, and I am writing to express my dedicated support for LD 1298, "An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensing."

This bill addresses a critical need in our state: the shortage of qualified and licensed social workers, and the potential barriers individuals face in obtaining licensure through the current examination process.

The shortage of certified social workers in Maine is having a significant impact on our communities. In the behavioral health point-in-time study published last fall, it was determined that there are almost 9,000 people waiting for an average of eight months to be able to access mental health counseling services in Maine. As a case manager, I witness firsthand the struggle for folks in need of case management services; this study found that almost 1400 hundred individuals, including adults with developmental disabilities, people in need of housing, and individuals wanting resources for entering and maintaining recovery of substance use, wait almost six months to be able to talk to someone about where to start. Addressing this shortage is crucial for the health and well-being of our state.

LD 1298 offers a sensible solution by establishing alternative pathways to licensure for individuals who have demonstrated competency through their education and experience but may have encountered difficulties with the current Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) examination. While the ASWB exam is intended to confirm that students who have graduated with a Master of Social Work degree are proficient in so doing, it is not without its limitations. Recent data compiled in the 2022 Exam Pass Rate Analysis has brought to light significant disparities in exam pass rates. This report states, "The Association of Social Work Boards (2022) reported that between 2018 and 2021, the first-time pass rate for the Clinical social work licensing exam was 84% for white examinees. On the other hand, Black examinees had a pass rate of 45%, Hispanic/Latino examinees had a pass rate of 65%, and Asian examinees had a pass rate of 72%."

This information reveals alarming disparities that raise serious concerns about potential systemic biases within the exam and highlights the urgent need for a more equitable licensure process. Couple this with the cost of \$260 to take the exam, and the added fee to receive official certification paperwork from the state once the exam is passed, along with any materials purchased to prepare for the exam, and it becomes clear that this should not be the only means for being able to practice as licensed following a rigorous master's degree schooling event. These factors can disproportionately affect otherwise qualified candidates, hindering their ability to serve our communities.

By providing alternative pathways, LD 1298 would increase the number of licensed social workers practicing in Maine, which will directly address the workforce shortage and improve access for clients; ensure competency for social work professionals via the assessment process, without hindering skilled workers via a prohibitive exam; and promote equity by reducing barrier for licensure for individuals from diverse backgrounds, and those facing financial challenges.

I understand the importance of maintaining exacting standards for social work practice, and I recognize the importance of equal access to certification for all of us.

LD 1298 strikes a balance between ensuring competency and removing unnecessary obstacles to licensure. It allows for a more comprehensive and equitable evaluation of a candidate's qualifications. Therefore, I strongly urge the Committee to support LD 1298. This bill is a crucial step towards strengthening our social work workforce, improving access to vital services, and promoting the well-being of all Mainers. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Genuinely,