Arabella Perez, LCSW, DSW
Chief Operating Officer at Social Current
University of New England
School of Social Work Adjunct Faculty
Aperezedgar3@gmail.com
4/15/25

Re: Support for LD 1298 – An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Worker Licensing

To the Honorable Chairs and Members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee:

I am writing in strong support of LD 1298, "An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Worker Licensing," sponsored by Senator Rachel Talbot Ross. This bill offers a timely and just solution to long-standing barriers in the licensure process that have limited access to the social work profession, particularly for individuals from historically marginalized communities.

I have seen the pain, frustration, and injustice experienced by well-qualified, passionate social workers who cannot enter the field simply because they struggle with the ASWB exam. This is not a question of competency. It is a reflection of structural barriers embedded in the test itself.

As someone deeply engaged in social work education, organizational accreditation and training, and bringing effective community services to our Maine residents, I have witnessed firsthand the inequities perpetuated by an overreliance on a single, standardized licensure exam. Data from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) make these disparities unmistakable:

Data from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) between 2011 and 2021 reveal significant disparities:

- Only **66.7% of Black test-takers** eventually pass the Masters-level exam, compared to **93.7% of White test-takers**.

- First-time pass rates also show a stark divide—**63.6% for White candidates**, but only **39.5% for Black candidates**.

- **Non-native English speakers** consistently experience lower pass rates than English speakers, both on first and subsequent attempts.

What's even more troubling is that these inequities **persist among retakers**. Individuals who fail once are more likely to fail again, not due to a lack of skill, but because of growing test anxiety, lack of meaningful feedback, and limited access to high-cost prep resources. Each failed attempt increases emotional and financial strain, pushing many talented individuals out of the profession entirely.

The ASWB exam, as it currently stands, measures test-taking ability not relational skill, ethical reasoning, or practical knowledge. It favors certain learning styles and cultural norms and does little to assess the qualities that actually make someone a competent, compassionate social worker. For a profession built on values of justice, dignity, and human connection, this is unacceptable.

LD 1298 proposes an alternative path that preserves rigor while addressing equity: supervised practice, jurisprudence exams, and competency-based evaluations. This approach reflects how social work is actually practiced and offers a more just, inclusive, and effective way to assess readiness for licensure.

At a time when Maine is facing serious behavioral health workforce shortages, we cannot afford to exclude qualified professionals through outdated gatekeeping methods. If we are serious about equity, community well-being, and the sustainability of our field, we must modernize licensure practices to reflect our values—not reinforce systemic barriers.

I urge you to vote in favor of LD 1298 and help lead Maine toward a more equitable and competent social work workforce.

With deep respect and appreciation,

Arabella Perez

Arabella Perez, LCSW, DSW
Adjunct Social Work Faculty
University of New England
Chief Operating Officer Social Current