

LD 1298 Testimony, April 15, 2025

My name is Grace Valenzuela and I work for the Portland Public Schools as the Executive Director for Communications and Family/Community Partnerships. In this role, I oversee programs that support and advance family engagement in the district. My testimony will come from the perspective of an immigrant and a person of color and as a longtime educator in the largest and most diverse school district in Maine. I will also bring to this issue the perspective of a leader in a majority minority school district that is working to address diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

I understand that the testing requirement is a barrier for acquiring licensure for social work graduates, specifically those from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. LD1298 is thoughtful legislation that provides an alternative pathway for social work licensure. There are numerous arguments why LD1298 is common sense legislation:

- 1) It will expand the pool of professionals in the field of social work, which will help alleviate the challenges in filling job openings in the state.
- 2) We have colleges and a university system that offer social work degrees. The graduates are already here. Let's keep all the graduates we have here in Maine. We are a state that needs behavioral health workers. It's a lot more work to attract professionals from outside the state.
- 3) It will fill the need to support our increasing numbers of students/families/community members who speak a language other than English. Bilingual/multilingual social workers are better able to reach out and build trusting relationships with these clients.
- 4) As with our licensed teachers, public schools also provide coaching, mentoring, supervision, and evaluation to social workers, core pillars in their professional development. This one-on-one support and training ensures their continuous professional development.

Also – and this is very important – I want to explicitly state that LD 1298 is about opening doors and advancing social justice. It's about the creation of a more just society and a more just state of Maine, because this legislation removes the barrier in licensing for people who have completed their social work coursework but have challenges in passing an exam. Requiring the testing may have come from a place of good intention, but to ignore years of data that the testing is a barrier specifically for

racial minority groups and non-native speakers of English, is to be complicit in systemic racism. Systems are designed to shut out certain groups of people. It may not be the intent, but that is the impact. LD 1298 opens the door so that behavioral health clients will have access to a social work professional with the appropriate language skills, cultural background and/or racial affinity. It also will enable them to have access to a professional who has the firsthand knowledge and the shared lived experiences of a minoritized group in a white dominant community.

LD 1298 is an attempt to tear down requirements that exclude, that inhibit inclusion and integration. I thank and applaud the legislators who sponsored this bill, for your tenacity, and for finding a compromise for other appropriate pathways for social work graduates seeking licensure.

Thank you very much for listening and for the work that you do to represent the interests of the people of Maine, especially those who are historically underrepresented.

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