Dear Sen. Bailey, Rep. Matheison, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Caitlin Eldridge, and I live in South Portland, Maine. I am the Director of Social Work Programs at Saint Joseph's College in Standish, ME. I am writing in support of LD 1298: An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Worker Licensing.

As a social work educator, part of my role is to prepare students for professional social work careers, which includes preparation for the ASWB exam. Even for the most accomplished students, the prospect of sitting for the ASWB exam causes significant stress and concern. Our wonderful Wellehan Library offers a collection of test prep materials, and we dedicate a significant amount of time to detailing the exam and licensure process to become a licensed social worker in the State of Maine. Students need to be competent practitioners, and as a CSWE-accredited program, we hold them to the highest academic and professional standards. We use a comprehensive matrix to map out each of the nine Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards, and we assess students at multiple points throughout the program to assure that they are meeting these requirements.

Any student who does not meet the standards is counseled out of the Social Work program, starting in the sophomore year. This robust gatekeeping system is not only a requirement of the CSWE accreditation, but it is also the right thing to do in order to maintain a well-informed, competent, and effective human services workforce in our great State of Maine. I am confident that the integrity and competence of social workers in Maine will not be compromised by removing the exam requirement. In fact, in my professional opinion, the ASWB exam is more problematic than it is helpful. Like many standardized tests, it does not accurately reflect the knowledge and competency of a diverse population of social work students, nor does it bear much resemblance to actual scenarios and applications in the field itself. According to one article on the subject, the exams "do not appear to correlate in any meaningful way with the thing that they are supposed to measure: Safety for independent practice." We can do better by our workforce, our procedures, and our profession.

LD 1298 is a step in the right direction for the social work profession. It will help to address three complex and intertwined problems. First, moving away from the ASWB exam requirement for the first three levels of social work licensure will remove a significant barrier that is preventing eager, qualified, and competent new social workers from practicing in the field. This will enhance our ability to tend to the needs of our most vulnerable people and systems. Second, the pool of new social workers will be

more diverse in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and culture/language. Studies have shown that the ASWB exam is not equitable in terms of pass rates for test-takers from more marginalized populations (Nienow, 2023). As Maine's demographics continue to shift and diversify, we will be able to meet this evolving need with practitioners who look like, speak like, and live in community with their clients. Representation matters. Third, this change will bring Maine into alignment with the recommendations from the Council on Social Work Education, which has recommended that states suspend their use of the ASWB at least until its implications are better understood. Given the unprecedented level of need for social work services in our community, and the behavioral health, substance use, and housing crises that are unfolding before us, it seems imperative to me that we utilize every available strategy to tackle these complex issues. In a world where so much is out of our control, why wouldn't we take the opportunity to remove the ASWB exam requirement to clear the path to a more equitable future for social workers in Maine?

References:
Nienow, M., Sogabe, E., & Husain, A. (2023). Racial Disparity in Social Work Licensure Exam Pass Rates. Research on Social Work Practice, 33(1), 76-83. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315221125885