

Shimon Cohen
Doin' The Work LLC
LD 1298

April 15, 2025

Testimony re: LD 1298 “An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Worker Licensing” — OUGHT TO PASS

Honorable Members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1298. My name is Shimon Cohen and I am a licensed clinical social worker in Maine, and reside in Portland. I am originally from Maine, and graduated from Yarmouth High School in 1995. I received my Master of Science of Social Work from Columbia University in 2011. I train social work professionals, see clients in private practice, and teach as an adjunct lecturer at New York University. I was a full-time clinical faculty member in a school of social work in Miami, FL for 5 years, teaching graduate and undergraduate students. I have over 20 years of experience in social services and over 10 years of university-level teaching experience. I am committed to the values and ethics that form the foundation of our profession, and I would only support a bill that I see as furthering social work’s mission to help people.

We are using exams that have never been shown to predict one’s ability to be a good social worker. However, they have been shown to be barriers to licensure, especially for social workers of color, older social workers, and social workers for whom English is a second language.

Social workers graduating with an MSW have already demonstrated competency according to accreditation standards set by the Council on Social Work Education. That graduate level training, of which I know as a student and as faculty, is both rigorous in terms of classroom instruction and real-life application through intensive internships required to graduate. These internships are supervised by experienced social workers who evaluate students on their practice skills. After graduation, first there is the LMSW exam, which I believe is redundant due to the nationally accredited education just completed. Next, if they pass that exam, social workers must complete a significant number of hours under the supervision of an experienced LCSW and then pass the national LCSW exam. Again, both of these exams have never been shown to predict one’s ability to be a good social worker, yet they have been shown to keep social workers from being licensed, impacting the number of licensed social workers available to the public. We know a mental health provider shortage is a huge problem in Maine.

The proposed alternative pathways are necessary to address the problems related to these exams. I actually find it problematic to require so many additional hours for social workers when we know these exams are biased. However, at this point, the proposed alternative pathways are the most likely option to pass to address the issues for all parties involved. So I am giving my full support for this legislation to create these alternative pathways.

Lastly, I’d like to talk about the pass rate discrepancies between White, Black, Latino, and Indigenous social workers, as well as older social workers and those whose first language is not English. The debate often becomes why these different pass rates exist. Some think there needs to be a change in schools of social work, even though they are accredited and evaluated on a regular basis. Others think that social workers of color need to study harder. But research has shown that social workers of color put hours and hours and lots of money into studying for these exams. What often gets ignored is the construction of the test itself. And what we find with the test is that certain scenarios are written from a certain perspective of what is normal and how people, society, and families should operate. Much of the test is about the order of what you would do first in a given situation. But social work is not always linear with step 1 step 2 step 3. Context is everything. Sometimes step 3 is best to do first.

Sometimes the exam's step 1 is actually harmful, especially in certain communities. Until the pass rate statistics do not have such large discrepancies, we have to be skeptical and critical of the test. Otherwise, we are engaging in racial discrimination by knowingly using a test that has such differences based on race. And by using an exam that is racially discriminatory, the State, whether intentional or not, is engaging in the functional equivalent of racial discrimination.

Thank you for listening and allowing me to provide this testimony in support of LD 1298. Please do the right thing for the betterment of social work and the people of our state.

Thank you,
Shimon Cohen, LCSW