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University of Maine System Testimony Supporting
LD 1298, *An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Worker Licensing*
Presented by Elizabeth Armstrong, University of Maine Director of the School of Social Work, April 15, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services. My name is Elizabeth Armstrong, and I am the Director of the School of Social Work at the University of Maine. I present this testimony in strong support of LD 1298 on behalf of the University of Maine System and my colleagues, the directors of the other two UMS social work programs: Dr. Caroline Shanti from the University of Southern Maine and Dr. Beverly Wagner from the University of MainePresque Isle. Our System is the state's leading provider of social workers. Our programs currently enroll more than 500 undergraduate and graduate social work students and conferred 134 in-demand degrees last academic year.

Our testimony today underscores our commitment to cultivating competent social work professionals. We see a transparent and standardized licensure process overseen by a regulatory board as an essential safeguard that protects the public from potential harm by ensuring mental health providers' competence. As the state's public social work education institutions, our mandate is to prepare knowledgeable, competent practitioners ready for professional practice across settings.

Our programs provide the person-power needed to fill well-documented gaps in Maine's social service, mental health, and behavioral health workforce. A 2022 ruling by the U.S. Department of Justice found Maine's behavioral health system was failing to adequately support Maine children and families due in large part to a lack of services. A 2024 settlement directed the state to increase the number of skilled providers of behavioral health services. According to the federal Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA), eleven of Maine's sixteen counties include at least one designated mental health provider shortage area and eight include two or more such areas. Statewide, HRSA estimates that Maine has 60% of the behavioral health workforce it needs. For these reasons, **identifying and eliminating barriers to qualified social workers entering practice is crucial**.

The existing licensure exam process, which has well-documented flaws and biases that prevent otherwise qualified professionals from entering the workforce, is one such barrier.[1] **Although most UMS social work graduates pass the first time they attempt the licensing exam,[2] retaking the exam results in added time, stress, and costs for those who don't initially pass.** This delays and in some cases prevents applicants from using the degrees to which they've already dedicated significant time, effort, and financial resources. Otherwise qualified

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[1] These disparities are well-documented by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) both nationally and in Maine. Based on data from 2011 to 2021, Black test takers in Maine had a first-time pass rate of 59.1%, Hispanics had a rate of 80%, and Asians had a pass rate of 63.6% while white test takers had a first-time pass rate of 93.7%. There are age-based disparities as well, with a 79.9% pass rate for test-takers over 50 compared to 91.1% for those ages 29 and younger.

[2] For UMS schools of social work, the first-time pass rates for the BSW, Master's, and LCSW exams were 80.8%, 94.9%, and 85.3%, respectively. For repeat test-takers, they were 64.3% (BSW), 35.3% (Master's), and 58.3% (LCSW). Detailed pass rate data is available through ASWB.

applicants who retake the exam pass at lower rates than first-time test takers, further underscoring the need for alternative pathways.

University of Maine System graduates are thoroughly prepared for professional practice, and their readiness extends beyond exam results. All three schools of social work are accredited by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), the national accrediting body for social work education. [The accreditation process is "rigorous and peer-reviewed."](#) It requires ongoing monitoring of student progress, measurement of learning outcomes, and demonstration of competence through supervised practice. As a requirement for accreditation, students complete 400 or more hours of supervised practice at the BSW level and 900 or more hours at the MSW level. BSW and MSW internships are supervised by fully licensed social workers in vetted practice sites with faculty oversight. As part of this process, students develop detailed, competency-based learning plans that are used to assess their progress at both the midpoint and end of internships. Students receive a BSW or MSW only after having demonstrated competency in all areas covered by their learning plan.

The proposed licensure process under LD 1298 reinforces existing safeguards for ensuring social workers have the knowledge, skills, and ethical commitments needed to provide high-quality care to their clients and communities. It also addresses barriers associated with the current process. **The alternative pathways proposed** for those who do not initially pass their ASWB exam – [a jurisprudence exam, a strategy used in several other states and regarded as an equitable alternative](#), completion of additional supervised practice hours, and submission of letters of reference – **are well-aligned with recommendations by the Council for Social Work Education and National Association of Social Workers**. **My colleagues and I believe LD 1298 in the best interest of our graduates and the communities they serve**

In sum, **LD 1298 strengthens existing strategies for ensuring social workers have the skills and capacities they need to be safe and effective professionals while addressing inequities and barriers associated with the current licensure process**. Critically, it ensures BSW and MSW graduates enter the workforce both efficiently and fully competent to serve the communities where they are so needed.

Thank you, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson and committee members for the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.