

Good afternoon, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, honorable members of the HCIFS Committee, NASW Maine colleagues, and community members who have taken their time to testify today. My name is Keita Whitten Foster. I am testifying today on two fronts. First, I am a retired clinical social worker whose resume demonstrates over thirty years of social work in various key positions, including private practice, in Maine. Secondly, I am testifying as a current Maine Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (MePCSW) appointee. I will be sharing my perspective only as a committee member. I will not be testifying on behalf of the Maine Commission on the Status of Women in Maine.

My career as a Maine social worker includes

- A Preble Street Casemanager
- A CPS worker with the Dept of Health and Human Services
- An HCT Section 65/17 Clinician and BHP
- An assistant research analyst with The Muskie Inst Of Public Service
- A social science adjunct
- A certified Kripalu Yoga Instructor teaching embodied liberation with women survivors of war, rape, and torture.
- A Somatic Experiencing Practitioner (SEP) treating PTSD and resolving intergenerational trauma-related adversity.
- A community and school-based clinician
- An AmeriCorps Vista Volunteer with The Maine Coalition for Food Security
- A gubernatorial committee member informing on matters of poverty in Maine.
- This includes serving in numerous community organizations as change agents addressing disparities in cultural competency, inclusion, equity, health, wellness, and economic stability.
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My primary concern is the potential financial implications if this Bill is not passed. How would this directly affect the economic stability of families, particularly single-parent households led by women?

This past December, the Maine Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (MePCSW) released a *report on Maine women's labor, employment, and economic security. The report underscored the stark reality that women are overrepresented in care professions, such as social work, where competitive compensation and livable wages are often lacking. This exacerbates the gender wage gap, leading to financial hardship for Maine women, families, and single-parent households led by women. It also hinders the recruitment and retention of Maine's social work workforce, creating additional hardship for Mainers by causing service gaps, especially in rural areas.

The report also stressed the need for Maine to focus on strategies to engage a diverse workforce, particularly in health care, to meet the needs of BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and rural residents. This is crucial; this bill could be one such strategy aimed at recruiting and retaining a diverse social work workforce that is representative of many skilled, educated, and experienced providers across multiple demographics throughout the state. As the only standardized measurement for determining practice competency, the licensure exam may be an unnecessary barrier. We know from national debates across multiple disciplines asking similar questions, like are SAT exams still a comparable tool for determining academic vigor and success?

So, I will ask you how denying this bill addresses the concerns I have raised today.

*Maine Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. (2024). A Report on Maine Women's Labor and Economic Security." Available at: <https://www.maine.gov/sos/womens-comm/documents/MaineStatusOfWomenRepo1t2024.pdf>.

Keita Annie Whitten Foster
Harrison
LD 1298

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