

January 22, 2024

My name is Priscila Bitencourt. I am the McKinney Vento Liaison for the district of Portland. In my role, I support families experiencing homelessness and staff to become more culturally responsive when working with our multilingual population. I have been unable to provide any much-needed clinical services because I don't have a license. I have taken the exam 6 times and failed every time because of a lack of equitable language access and systemic racism.

I entered the school of social work in 2016. Going back to school after so many years wasn't easy. Still, I was committed to becoming a bilingual social worker in a state with a growing multilingual population. Throughout the five years of my BSW and MSW program, I had many opportunities to increase my knowledge and be inspired by the field, including an internship with Spurwink and Portland Public Schools, where my dream began. My experiences would all have been a successful path to a promising career if not for the equity challenges I have faced since graduating with my Masters in Social Work in 2021. I graduated from USM with a 4.0 GPA and excellent references. Still, this was not enough for me to pass the ASWB Masters exam.

The first time I tried, I failed by 10 points. I initially thought it was okay because this was my first experience. The second time I tried, I failed by six questions. At this time, I could identify that the language was the barrier. I have been able to use the accommodation of an English dictionary, but many times, the words on the exams are not in the dictionary.

After the second time, I burned out. I had spent my entire summer studying and sacrificing the time I had to spend with my family. I traveled 100 miles to take the exam out of state because the site in Maine was never available. I spent more than I could afford on materials, classes, tutoring, and exam registration. Lastly, coming home and facing the sadness on my kids' faces when they realized how discouraged I was or the frustration of co-workers who supported me as we saw the equity issue before our eyes.

Maine has recently welcomed thousands of families who speak Portuguese and are coming with an intense trauma history. I am the ONLY social worker in Maine who speaks Portuguese. So, giving up is not an option.

Every time I take the exam, I feel more discouraged with the field of social work. An area in my mind that would be free of discrimination, racism, and equity challenges is showing another side. On Jan 16, 2024 I was scheduled to take the exam again at the new site. I took the day off, and when I got there, they told me they had canceled my exam because the site did not have a dictionary. If this was not enough, they tried to charge me the exam fee again.

Recently, my professional journey collapsed. I was told that I could no longer be called a social worker. My name is Priscila Bitencourt; I am a proud Latina and a person of color who can identify that the ASWB exam is a form of institutional racism.