

Good afternoon members of the committee, and my heartfelt thanks to both Speaker Ross and Representative Lydia Craft, for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you about LD 1990 at this important time in our history. I am here today as a person concerned with the mental health of all of our residents in the State of Maine. My name is Blanca Santiago, I am licensed as a clinical social worker and have a small private practice. I was a former employee of Portland Public Schools and since retiring as the only social worker of color in a very culturally and linguistically diverse community, I have provided support to new social workers, students of social work and other BIPOC staff for the last 3 years. Workforce development-it's personal because my goal has been to leave my profession better than I found it.

As field instructor, this work has been to help grow, develop and support social work students during their internships at PPS. My goal has been to lend that support and guidance to social work students who speak one of the five primary languages in our district and to help develop the core competencies needed to pass their final internship fieldwork. My hope is that our social work interns feel a connection to the work at PPS and want to be part of our district's community of dedicated educators and counselors. Through a commitment to equity, we can ensure that more Black, Brown, Indigenous, Hispanic, or Latino professionals are welcomed into the field of social work, not just as students of colleges and universities, but as newly inspired, educated and dedicated professionals that understand how to intervene with compassion and skill.

Our workforce slowly but increasingly reflects the diversity of our students and families-but we must do better. Our work force will need to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity necessary to meet the needs of a changing demographic. Inclusion is essential to shed light on and undo entrenched prejudice and bias.

One of the biggest challenges to this reality is that the ASWB exam is culturally and racially biased making it difficult, costly and at times demoralizing when students don't pass the exam the first, second, third-or more times. Even students who graduated with high honors and possess language fluency can struggle to get through. I barely passed. My colleagues will speak to that point in more detail. Last year, the ASWB supported my assertion by releasing data to prove this point.

Unfortunately, the ASWB, the entity responsible for licensing new social workers has become an obstacle to the goals of equity and inclusion. In fact, by their own admission they released a report last year that confirms without question that the test is not free of discrimination, racism, and equity challenges. A recent report by the ASWB confirms racial disparities over the licensing exam pass rate. 65% of Hispanics/Latino and only 46% of blacks can pass the exams. In addition, older white women also struggle to pass. I passed by a hair...

To this day, it is a known fact that a person's test score has little to do with proficiency, professionalism or excellence in the field.

This perspective is not new and many institutions of higher learning have eliminated exams for incoming students. Other professions also challenge the validity of testing scores and have either challenged or eliminated testing as a requirement for licensure or professional certification. States all over our nation are proposing legislation that eliminates or puts a hold on the ASWB licensing exam in particular. Some states have won and the ASWB has been ineffective in responding to these challenges with solutions that work in the real world. It's not because test takers don't study. They can pay for the materials from ASWB and then pay for the test multiple times in order to pass. No person with their chosen livelihood at stake will be so foolish as to NOT study. I assure you that ASWB will prosper even if we are left without a colleague that can actually help a child and his family through the many challenges facing our state and the nation,

After all, we are experiencing in this country a mental health crisis of epic proportions. Lewiston is a reminder to all of us that mass shootings and their aftermath is possible here in our State. It's not just fear mongering. Portland is a settlement city and home to the most diverse populations in the state. Should we wait to see how we're going to meet the mental health needs of our residents or should we be proactive and continue to train, support and remove barriers? Let us instead create a workforce poised and prepared to meet these social and environmental challenges! My final answer: Let's not wait or hesitate. The time is now. I'm in favor of eliminating the testing requirement as written in the bill, for a period of time which allows the good people of Maine to study the process by creating a work group, as other states have done. I thank you for your time

and urge you to not leave the mental health needs of all of our citizens, especially our K-12 students without the help and support they so desperately need and cannot ask for themselves.