

LD 1990 Testimony, January 25, 2024

My name is Grace Valenzuela and I work for Portland Public Schools as the Executive Director for Communications and Family/Community Partnerships. In this role, I oversee programs that support and advance family engagement in the district. I understand that the testing requirement in the licensure of social workers affects professionals from different backgrounds. My testimony will come from the perspective of an immigrant and a person of color and as a longtime educator in the largest and most diverse school district in Maine. I will also bring the acute lens of a majority minority school district that is working to address diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

There are numerous arguments why LD1990 is common sense legislation:

- 1) It will expand the pool of professionals in the field of social work, which will help alleviate the challenges in filling job openings in the state.
- 2) We have colleges and a university system that offer social work degrees. The graduates are already here. Let's keep all the graduates we have here in Maine. We are a state that needs behavioral health workers. It's a lot more work to attract professionals from outside the state.
- 3) As we do with our licensed teachers, public schools provide coaching, mentoring, supervision, and evaluation to social workers, core pillars in their professional development. Each individual brings competencies that you cannot measure on one test. The one-on-one support and continuous training offer pathways for growth.
- 4) It will fill the need to support our increasing numbers of students/families/community members who speak a language other than English. Bilingual/multilingual social workers are better able to reach out and build trusting relationships with these clients.
- 5) The National Association of Social Workers recently came out to oppose the Association of Social Work Board (ASWB) standardized exam.

Also – and this is very important – I want to explicitly state that LD 1990 is about social justice. It's about the creation of a more just society, a more just state of Maine.

Requiring the testing may have come from a place of good intention, but to ignore years of data that the testing is a barrier specifically for racial minority groups and non-native speakers of English, is to be complicit in systemic racism. Systems are designed to shut out certain groups of people. It may not be the intent, but that is the impact.

- The full impact will be borne by the clients who will not have access to a professional with the appropriate language skills, cultural background or racial affinity.
- The full impact will be borne by the clients who will not have access to a professional with the firsthand knowledge and the shared lived experiences of a minoritized group in a white dominant community.
- The full impact will be borne by the clients who will continue to bear the brunt and suffer the consequences of institutional racism.

LD 1990 is an attempt to tear down requirements that exclude, that inhibit inclusion and integration. If you are not moved by the practical, commonsense arguments I enumerated, I hope you are moved by the social justice argument. **It's what matters.**

I thank and applaud the legislators who sponsored this bill. I hope other legislators recognize that justice is at the heart of this legislation. Please do not use process as an excuse to not remove a flawed test that is a barrier to qualified social workers being able to provide culturally competent mental health services to populations that desperately need it. Please end actions that contribute to institutionalizing racism. Let us weaken structures that feed this behemoth.

Thank you very much for listening and for the work that you do to represent the interests of the people of Maine, especially those who are historically underrepresented.

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