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**Testimony on LD 1298 – *An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Worker Licensing***

Good afternoon Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and honorable Committee members. My name is Chris McLaughlin, and I am a licensed clinical social worker with close to 30 years of experience providing and leading behavioral health services across a variety of treatment settings here in Maine. I am also the proud former Executive Director of the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW ME).

I first want to personally thank the Senator for her sponsorship of LD 1298 and for her leadership and unwavering commitment to finding innovative solutions to our state's behavioral health crisis. It's been a privilege working with the Senator for the last few years on this issue. As several of you know, last session the then Speaker brought forth an earlier version of legislation seeking a reprieve from the harm being done by the ASWB exam. I strongly believe that the version of this legislation in front of you today is a better bill, due in great part to the feedback offered by members of this Committee as well as from stakeholder groups across Maine and the country. I offer this testimony in continued advocacy for meaningful reform to the current licensure process, specifically the requirement of the ASWB examination as a universal measure of competency for our great profession. Let me be clear: Reform is not about lowering standards; it's about removing unnecessary and unjust barriers for individuals who have shown competence in social work practice.

The ASWB exam, while designed to ensure a standard of knowledge and public protection, has demonstrated serious gaps in both its structure and outcomes. These disparities revealed by ASWB call into question the validity of using a single, high stakes standardized test as the primary indicator of a candidate's readiness to practice. Moreover, this approach excludes well-qualified professionals who possess the lived experience, cultural competence, and relational skills our communities need, especially in underserved areas. Last year, the Committee heard from dozens of individuals who shared stories of how the ASWB exam has kept them from obtaining social work licensure in our state, a critical aspect of our State's social work title protection law that requires a license to call oneself a "social worker". These individuals all

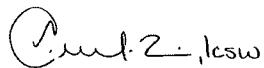
possess the training, expertise, and passion required for our noble profession, yet they have been barred from calling themselves “social workers”, impacting their ability to work in as field that so desperately needs them. I’m confident that you will hear similar stories today. I’m also confident that you will hear very loud, but very small in numbers, fear-based arguments on why the ASWB exam must remain in place. I would ask you in advance to please consider the source of that rhetoric and think critically about the agenda driving this narrative forward, not just here in Maine but across the country in public hearing after public hearing in states where similar efforts to rid gate keeping from social work licensing have been proposed.

Licensure is essential to protect the public and uphold professional standards in social work. However, the tools we use to assess readiness for licensure must be valid, equitable, and aligned with the realities of practice. I would suggest that these tools themselves must also be culturally competent for all test takers. Simply put, the ASWB exam measures a candidate’s test-taking ability more than practical, real-world competencies.

I urge the Committee to consider and support the exploration of alternative, evidence-based licensure pathways such as supervised practice models, jurisprudence examinations, and performance-based assessments of practice. These options would allow for rigorous and accountable evaluation of professional readiness while addressing long-standing inequities in the licensure process. Reforming this requirement is not only an issue of fairness, but also a necessary innovative step toward building a more representative and responsive social work workforce that reflects the values of our profession and meets the needs of our communities with integrity and care.

I’m so very proud of this bill and the work done by this passionate team over the last 2 years to advance the practice of social work in Maine, and I look forward to working with the Committee in any way I can in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris McLaughlin", followed by the text "MSW, LCSW".

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