

Hello, my name is Kim Cocca and I am a 55 yr old white educated female who struggled to pass this ASWB exam for social work to obtain my LMSWcc. I work in rural Maine as a school social worker and in Oct 2023 I finally passed to obtain my LMSWcc. I work in Rumford, ME so the needs are extremely high and resources are little to none because of the population with low income poverty level families with layers of trauma needs that are not being met due to location. I have written this to share my story.

After several attempts and waivers and expenses I have finally past the LMSW exam by only a few points. Prior to this passing exam I was feeling frustrated and defeated. I was feeling like I was a failure. I graduated from UNE in 2020 with a GPA 3.8 in my class with a MSW while working full time. I am very passionate and love the work I do. I am good at what I do and am very active in my community advocating for others, especially children. I was told by my school Principal, Superintendent and my LCSW supervisor, that this test does not dictate the work I do and that I should not feel defeated but I did. I know that other states are starting to look at this exam and are seeing it as only a money making business with many disparities. I am asking here today, what the Maine Legislature and the NASW outlook is on this exam to make changes. I understand it can take years for change to happen. I have heard from others in other states, those states are looking to give any MSW graduate their LMSW license with 2 years of supervision and keep the LCSW as an exam with supervision hours. This allows an LMSW to continue on to LCSW if they wish and follow those exam protocols.

On February 12, 2023 I wrote to the Maine NASW chapter to express my barriers I have faced multiple times taking the LMSW exam for the ASWB. Below is my back story.

### **ASWB Exam challenges that I have faced and struggling to overcome.**

The ASWB exam presents many challenges for me since I started my licensing journey for my LMSW. My grad school UNE in Maine has not prepared me or others for this exam. I am not a good test taker so I take accountability for my failing this exam twice for some of it. What I do blame on the ASWB is the way the exam is scored, written, and presented. That is where I do not take accountability for in failing the exam several times by 1 or 3 points.

My journey of taking my LMSW exam path began during 2021, the pandemic was happening and there were so many things going on with my health due to Long Haul Covid that created several barriers for me. The first time I took the exam it took me many hours and searching to find a Peason Center that was not over 100 miles away from my home. I ended up taking the exam in the next state which was over 160 miles away. This started my financial hardship with this exam placement center. I had to take a half day off from work to travel that was unpaid, then a hotel room and the cost of apply for the exam and the cost of travel tolls and fuel to get there. Then to add salt to the deep pocket wound was my test anxiety as I had no idea what to expect or what to expect once I arrived in the center. I did not pass my LMSW at that time, I missed it by 1 question. I left there in tears. I struggled to find the best answer to some of the

questions being asked. They were unrealistic and coming from a very rural area with very little resources and severe high needs, the exam questions did not make sense to me. I struggled to understand exactly what the question wanted because of the presented unrealistic answers that would not be the best choice in the work I have been doing for the past 8 years. Then to find out I had to wait 90 days before I could re-apply was upsetting but I moved forward and accepted that it was me who was the failure on this exam.

I re-applied for the exam 5 months later, once I was able to save up enough money to send in to re-take this exam. At this point, I was going through some serious health issues and no one could figure out what was happening to me until I met up with a specialist who finally figured out that I was experiencing Long Haul Covid. At that point, I was sent to another specialist who was operating the Long Haul Covid Recovery Center. I was still a hot mess, trying to work full-time and study for the LMSW exam. The night before the exam at 11:30 pm, I have major leg pain and racing heart rate and sweating. I was in the local hospital Emergency room. They were still learning about LHC, so we were educating each other. I left there at 7:00 am once I was cleared of blood clots and heart issues. I drove 90 miles to the Pearson test center in my state and took the exam at 11:00 am and failed the exam again by 3 questions. At this point, I could not even drive home I was distraught and unable to even understand where I was failing in the test. My job depends on my passing this LMSW exam to stay employed. At that point, my husband was able to talk me through it via cell phone and I was able to recompose myself and make the trip back 90 miles to my home. I am still feeling defeated one year later since my last failing exam episode. I understand the need for licensing for Social Work. I am disappointed in UNE, the ASWB and myself. UNE should offer free tutoring for the LMSW exam and maybe an 8-week class on how to take this exam. The ASWB, should be giving a discounted rate when you fail the exam and need to retake it. I have since learned that I need to ask for accommodations for the exam per my team of LHC specialists. It took me the full time minus 3 minutes to complete the ASWB exam for the LMSW. Having said that, I am at the stage of asking for 75% more time, as many breaks as I need, a single room so I can read aloud the questions as many times over again as needed to understand the question. I have sent in my paperwork and now I am waiting for a reply back.

Since the last time I took the exam, which was one year ago, I have been diagnosed with Long Haul Covid, Traumatic Brain Injury because of LHC, unstable blood pressure due to LHC, ongoing pulmonary dysfunction due to LHC, and the list goes on. I am working with a great team of specialists at the Long Haul Covid Recovery center. My speech therapist has been working with me for almost 11 months to help me learn how to process what I am reading, what is being said and how to process through audio. This has been a turning point for me to work around the brain fog I have due to the LHC. I have been paying for extra help with Agent of Changes, Liz Haddock tutoring, and any other audio and video help I can find to help me study for the LMSW ASWB exam.

I am very passionate about the work I do and I am good at it. I have been a children case manager, a SB-BHP, a Behavioral Liaison, a Crisis worker and now I am a school Social Worker – LSX ( which expires Aug 2023) I worked full time while I obtained my BS in MHHS in 3 years and continued to work and graduate in 24 months at UNE with my MSW. This was all pre-pandemic and pre-covid. I have enough background experience that helped me graduate with a 3.8 GPS in my master’s program. I am very proud of the work I do and my accomplishments. I work on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels at my job and in my community. I am very disappointed I cannot seem to pass the LMSW ASWB exam.

I feel that an LMSW license should be granted without exam but with proper portfolio with Supervision statements if the test taker like me who has been unable to pass the exam multiple times. There need to be positive portfolio to prove the work being done is following the Code of Ethics of Social Work and under the supervision of an LCSW. I do feel that an exam is necessary for the LCSW licensing. I am open to other ways of obtaining the LMSW instead of the ASWB exam.

The work I did and currently do does not fully correlate with what the exam is focused on as well as the fact that 20 questions do not even count makes it that more frustrating. Yes, I am not a good test taker, but the ASWB exams really needs to be redesigned for the today situations. One best answer with a second-best answer then 2 wrong answers need to be redesigned. Use it as a tier scoring form could be better option. Best answer 100% correct and if 2<sup>nd</sup> best answer is chosen to give it a 75% scoring rate. Every state in the Union as well as every culture and country are different. Having an exam that is only based off of ONE BEST ANSWER with a passing rate of 66% proves that there is something very wrong with the exam. I hate to add that I feel that the ASWB is just a money maker for the organization. They do not offer any financial discount for those who have failed multiple times and have to continue to pay those high application exam fees. Also, these exams should not have to be retaken if you move from one state to another. It should be reciprocal just like a driver’s license with a clean record.

Change.org stated on their web page, “In their discussion of results, ASWB also attempts to mask the racism inherent to the pass-rate disparity by focusing on the number of social workers who “eventually pass” the licensing exam after repeated attempts. They do not share how many times these social workers take the test in order to pass, or acknowledge the costs incurred (a minimum of \$260 for every ASWB exam). By emphasizing the need to take the exam repeatedly in order to pass, the ASWB ultimately reinforces that licensure is an exercise of financial resources, rather than ability. **To be clear:** ASWB’s report isn’t simply an interesting data set that needs further research. It’s a reflection of trauma—of careers that have been stalled, of lost wages, of communities deprived of clinical leadership. It diminishes the integrity of social work and demands immediate action.” (Unknown, 2023) This speaks volumes and as social workers we need to start making those changes. We are helpers for others but we need to change that and have it start within ourselves as being our own voice.

This is my journey of obtaining my LMSW. I hope there is growth with new changes in the ASWB exams across the board including reciprocal accepts across the board. I have not worked this hard to get where I am without barriers, failures and joy. I am on the journey to be the change I want to see in the world.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my story.

Kim Cocca, LMSW-cc

## References

Unknown. (2023). *ASWB: End Discriminatory Social Work Licensing Exams*. Retrieved from Change.org:  
<https://www.change.org/p/aswb-end-discriminatory-social-work-licensing-exams>