

January 25, 2024

Testimony re: LD 1990 “An Act to Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement” — OUGHT TO PASS

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and Honorable Members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of LD 1990. My name is Shimon Cohen and I am a licensed clinical social worker in Maine, and reside in Portland. I train social work professionals and see clients in private practice. I was a clinical faculty member in a school of social work in Miami, FL for 5 years, teaching graduate and undergraduate students. I am committed to the values and ethics that form the foundation of our profession, and I would only support a bill that I see as furthering social work’s mission to help people.

We are using an exam that has never been shown to predict one’s ability to be a good social worker. However, it has been shown to be a barrier to licensure, especially for social workers of color, older social workers, and social workers for whom English is a second language.

Social workers graduating with an MSW have already demonstrated competency according to accreditation standards set by the Council on Social Work Education. That graduate level training, of which I know as a student and as faculty, is both rigorous in terms of classroom instruction and real-life application through intensive internships required to graduate. These internships are supervised by experienced social workers who evaluate students on their practice skills. The LMSW exam is redundant and unnecessary.

In 2021, Illinois removed the testing requirement for a similar level of licensure, resulting in a huge increase in the number of licensed social workers available to provide services in their state. By removing the exam, we will increase the number of licensed master social workers in Maine, who would now be available to provide mental health services, which we know is an increasing need in our state.

And lastly, I’d like to talk about the pass rate discrepancies between White, Black, Latino, and Indigenous social workers, as well as older social workers and those whose first language is not

English. The debate often becomes why these different pass rates exist. Some think there needs to be a change in schools of social work, even though they are accredited and evaluated on a regular basis. Others think that social workers of color need to study harder. But research has shown that social workers of color put hours and hours and lots of money into studying for these exams. What often gets ignored is the construction of the test itself. And what we find with the test is that certain scenarios are written from a certain perspective of what is normal and how people, society, and families should operate. Much of the test is about the order of what you would do first in a given situation. But social work is not always linear with step 1 step 2 step 3. Context is everything. Sometimes step 3 is best to do first. Sometimes the exam's step 1 is actually harmful, especially in certain communities. Until the pass rate statistics do not have such large discrepancies, we have to be skeptical and critical of the test. Otherwise, we are engaging in racial discrimination by knowingly using a test that has such differences based on race. And by using an exam that is racially discriminatory, the State, whether intentional or not, is engaging in the functional equivalent of racial discrimination.

Thank you for listening and allowing me to provide this testimony in support of LD 1990. Let's do the right thing for the betterment of social work and really for the people of our state.

Thank you,
Shimon Cohen, LCSW