

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**

Dear Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and honorable members of the Joint Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services:

In 2022 the White House published an issue brief regarding the **growing mental health crisis** our nation is experiencing, which we all recognize is affecting our Maine community, too. **While the crisis impacts individuals across the lifecourse, the plight of youth** — the most vulnerable among us, and those to whom we especially owe our collective best efforts — **has recently risen in prominence.**

The White House brief cites a sobering statistic that approximately **50% of young adults are reporting symptoms of depression** (White House, 2022). A recent piece in the Portland Press Herald refers to the current state of affairs under which “**children and adolescents experiencing mental health crises** are languishing in emergency rooms throughout Maine because of **lack of access to psychiatric physicians and other mental health professionals** to whom to safely discharge them” (Barkin, 2023). The Maine KIDS COUNT Data Book 2023 reports that “**Maine’s rate of child maltreatment was the highest in the nation** at 19.0 per 1,000 children and **more than twice the national rate** of 8.4” in 2020 (Maine Children’s Alliance, 2023, p. 4).

This is not the leadership any of us have in mind when we consider Maine’s proud *Dirigo* motto.

Failing to take adequate preventive and responsive measures has long term costs and consequences that harm individuals, families, neighborhoods, and society on multiple levels. In addition to the difficult personal experience of mental and emotional struggles, known sequelae over the life course include **poorer academic performance and increased rates of behavioral troubles, crime, homelessness, incarceration, and future parenting shortfalls** (White House, 2022).

To be sure, a problem as complex as this one has neither just one cause, nor just one solution. However, **LD 1990: An Act to Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement, represents one clear opportunity to shift the mental health landscape in Maine for the better** — for those from all walks of life who would seek assistance, as well as for newly minted social workers seeking to enter the profession and begin meaningful careers providing such direly needed assistance.

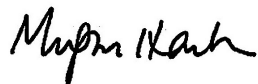
LD 1990 would allow for the **removal of an administrative barrier** to entry into social-work practice, in the form of a multiple-choice licensing exam that **has never been shown “to correlate with any ... measure of professional knowledge, safety, or effectiveness”** (Caldwell & Rousmaniere, 2022, p. 4). In fact, it has been determined that examinees could “provide **incorrect responses on all items related to legal and ethical compliance, and still pass their exam** by obtaining high enough scores in other content areas (Caldwell & Rousmaniere, 2022, p. 22).

Further, the **current licensing exam yields patterns of disproportionate failure rates** for groups of **practitioners who are likely to have notable breadth and depth of experience and insight**: social workers of color, especially those of greater age, and social workers whose primary language is one other than English (ASWB, 2022). Allowing this licensing status quo to continue does not make good sense, especially in a field whose **clients frequently present with complex needs requiring nuanced treatment**, and in which professional **practice is predicated on evidence-based techniques.**

When **the express purpose of licensure** is “**to protect the citizens of Maine**” (Maine Department of Professional and Financial Regulation, 2019), it is reasonable to expect that **the process will result in more good than harm**. It would seem in this case that **the converse is true**: entry into a field for which evidence-based practice is foundational is hindered by a **deeply flawed exam that lacks any predictive validity regarding competent practice**. This, at a time when **Maine faces an urgent need for qualified social workers** who have spent years acquiring **education and training in the context of nationally accredited institutes of higher learning**, and whose **work will continue to be supervised by senior professionals**.

For these reasons and more, I appreciate the opportunity to provide **commentary in support of LD 1990**: “An Act to Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement.” I trust that you, as members of this deliberative body tasked with acting in the best interests of those you represent and promoting the functioning of the Maine community as a whole, will give this issue thoughtful consideration and take subsequent well-reasoned action.

With appreciation for your time and dedicated public service,



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