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17126 Mountain Run Vista Ct.  
Culpeper, VA 22701

**t / 800.225.6880**  
**f / 540.829.0562**  
**info@aswb.org**

**aswb.org**

**Testimony of Jennifer Henkel, LCSW**

**Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services**

**Testifying in OPPOSITION to L.D. 1990**

**An Act To Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by  
Removing the Examination Requirement**

January 25, 2024

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services, my name is Jennifer Henkel, and I am the Senior Director of Member Engagement and Regulatory Services with the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). I am testifying before you today in opposition to L.D. 1990, An Act To Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement.

Licensing issuance decisions are a comprehensive process that include the consideration of education, experience, and examination. Of these, the exams are the only objective and continuously vetted component as the exam's distinct contributions of robust content and anti-bias measures are not part of the other two licensure elements of education and experience. As with licensure exams for other professions such as medicine, law, education, and psychology, social work examinations are reliable, valid, and involve a psychometric process that adheres to strict testing industry standards and serves as a means of providing competency assurances to employers and the public.

The removal of the examination requirement for any length of time would create differences among social workers with the same "licensed" title, resulting in a bifurcated system. This proposed legislation creates uncertainty as it does not offer a clear path on how to best proceed when the moratorium ends. Bifurcated licensure raises potential administrative tracking concerns, as well as concerns for social workers themselves who

may face opportunity limitations their counterparts who passed the exam would not face.

ASWB understands the desire to take action to address workforce challenges. However, eliminating the exam requirement may increase the risk of harm to the most vulnerable populations served by social workers—without having a significant impact on increasing the workforce. For the five-year period 1/1/2019 to 1/15/2024, 107 license applicants have been unable to pass the licensing exams in the state of Maine. This represents 1.5% of the licensed social work workforce in Maine. As of 8/21/2023 there were 7,090 licensed social workers in Maine, as published by the Department of Professional and Financial Regulation.

As a national organization, ASWB is familiar with workforce initiatives undertaken in other states that may be of interest to Maine lawmakers. For your consideration I have provided a brief summary of legislation that increases recruitment and retention of providers in the behavioral health care workforce from historically marginalized groups through the use of tax credits, financial support for examination fees, loan repayment programs, and other training initiatives which promote diversity in health professions.

Retention strategies that work towards ensuring that behavioral health workforce providers are reimbursed equitably when compared to peers in medicine, reduce stress on providers by offering financial incentives among payers, remove administrative burdens such as complex documentation and complex applications to join networks, reduce stress on providers and increase access to care by streamlining service approval from insurers, and offer loan forgiveness or student loan repayment programs to reduce stress from loan debt to increase the likelihood of a more diverse workforce, are the most effective pathway to addressing workforce needs.

The Social Work Licensure Compact that has been introduced across the nation and here in Maine, allows eligible social workers to practice in all states that join the compact. The goal is to eliminate barriers to practice and to client care along with ensuring public protection. The Social Work Licensure Compact will also enhance a state's ability to protect public safety by enhancing the mobility of social workers, improving access to professional social work services, improving continuity of care when clients travel or relocate, supporting relocating military spouses, and creating a data system of information about licensees including license status, investigative information, and adverse actions.

ASWB stands by the exam as a highly vetted process offering fairness to candidates and assurances to the public that we serve. We look forward to collaborating with the members of this committee and other stakeholders to ensure that the people of Maine have access to a diverse workforce of licensed professionals who have demonstrated the knowledge and skills to serve their communities.

Thank you for your consideration. I am happy to answer questions from the committee and will be available for the work session.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jennifer Heubel".

Senior Director of Member Engagement and Regulatory Services

Association of Social Work Boards

*ASWB is a nonprofit association whose members comprise the 64 social work licensing authorities from the United States and Canada. ASWB is recognized under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code as an entity that provides programs and services to social work regulatory boards in promoting uniformity and lessening burdens on state governments.*

## Legislative Summary

Hawaii [HB82 HD1](#) - *Expands preceptor tax credits to include social workers working under clinical supervision to obtain the clinical license.*

Oregon [HB2949](#) - *Creates the Behavioral Health Incentive Subaccount in the Health Care Provider Incentive Fund to increase recruitment and retention of providers in the behavioral health care workforce from historically marginalized groups. This fund is being used to support licensure candidates by paying for examination fees for up to 700 individuals in a two to three-year period. Specific priority is on incentivizing providers who are culturally specific, culturally responsive, linguistically specific, and/or rural providers.*

Nevada [AB 37](#) - *Establishes a loan repayment program for practitioners of health professions like social work who practice in areas of the state experiencing a workforce shortage for that profession*  
*Establishes the Behavioral Health Workforce Development Center of Nevada, who is required to develop and implement a strategic plan for the recruitment, education and retention of a qualified, diverse and evolving behavioral health workforce in this State.*

Louisiana [HCR44](#) - *Creates and provides for the Health Disparities in Rural Areas Task Force. Among other things duties of the newly created task force include studying practicable solutions for reducing healthcare provider shortages in rural communities of Louisiana. Collaborating with health professional licensing boards of this state to draft proposals for legislation that will foster greater access to care for rural residents. Developing proposals for healthcare workforce training initiatives which promote diversity in health professions.*