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Dedham  
LD 1990

To the Committee of Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services

My name is Olive Morelli, I am a graduate student in my last semester in the Masters of Social Work program at University of Maine in Orono. I am testifying today to share and emphasize two talking points. One, a sobering reality I face after I graduate and two, most importantly, what I believe to be central to social work, social justice and I hope to all of us here today, to address in an incremental yet significant ways the racist and exclusionary legacy of our country, state and policies.

I have worked in various capacities in social work for almost 10 years now. From survivors of DV and SA, to people experiencing houselessness, residential treatment centers, DHHS as a CPS case worker, Care coordinator for refugee and asylum seeking families, and now to research. In my experiences I have met social workers who dedicate their lives, not just time, but the emotional and mental labor of navigating difficult situations, systems, and conversations with children, families and communities. Most of these social workers did not pass a licensing exam, but are themselves to the core a social worker as they work to break down barriers, advocate and meet the various needs of clients and communities- basic needs, compassion, connection, and dare I say, love. It is known, social workers do not make copious amounts of money and similarly, we need a job, policies and systems that support us as well. When looking to further our professional capacities, taking on significant student loan debt while the uncertainty of even getting a license is in itself a huge deterrent.

We are in a provider shortage and in a great need for mental and behavioral health services across the nation, and here in Maine. Even more so, here in our State there is a greater need to lower barriers in our educational and workforce pathways to encourage students and social workers to come, study and practice in Maine.

Eliminating the requirement for conditional licensing exams would lower barriers in educational and workforce pathways for BIPOC, Older Adults, and those for whom English is not their first language to become much needed social workers. Which brings much needed racial representation and the power of lived experiences which will help to support access to care to individuals who are most marginalized. This means that BIPOC and Older Adults, who have already been doing care work will have a more equitable pathway that brings a unique level of safety and understanding to clinical practice and their clients, which is as we know foundational in any healthcare.

It is an unwavering truth in my experience as a white social worker that my empathy and education can only go so far to reach a community I may not be a part of, understand issues I have never lived through and provide clinical services to the depth and breadth of someone who may have a lived experience or identity I don't have. As we learn in social work, rapport, trust and community/client engagement are fundamentals. In fact, a part of my research now is just that- and these components all increase health outcomes and continuity of care. Which don't we want? Safe, healthy, vibrant communities here in maine? Voting for LD 1990 is supporting and bolstering underrepresented voices, children, older adults, families, and communities here in Maine by breaking down a barrier to more supportive and culturally relevant mental health services..

As I approach graduation, I have fear and insecurities looming over me. I am a solo parent and sole provider to my child. I am facing financial precarity, as the prospect of jobs leading up to being conditionally licensed (which can be up to 3 months) are what I am finding to be all lower/equivalent paying than what I had been making before I started graduate school. Which many agencies can do, solely based on the need for work and lack of an exam result even after graduating with a Masters degree. I am carrying \$150,000 worth of student loans, which is in part what pays my

mortgage now. When I graduate, there is no telling if I will have to sit for and pay one, two or more times for my exam before I can get a clinical position and better pay, but I do know I carry my racial and age privilege going into that exam that many do not.

Eliminating the conditional exam is not doing away with a necessary measurement of professional capacity. We have graduated with a degree of higher education, for grad students we will have over 900 hours of practicum and then enter into a conditionally licensed 2 year period with the guidance and direct supervision of 2,000 hours before we will sit for our clinical exams.

The conditional licensing exam is not ethical nor necessary, it is a costly barrier to equitable representation in our field and much needed clinical mental health services to the people in the State of Maine.