

Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services  
Cross Building, Room 220  
100 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333  
c/o Edna Cayford, clerk

Re: Testimony in Favor of Removing the ASWB Social Work Licensing Exam (LD 1990, HP1273)

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

My name is Arabella Perez. I am a proud social worker of 33 years, a native Spanish speaker, and a 26-year resident of Portland, Maine.

I am writing to express my support for the removal of the Association of Social Work Board Examiners (ASWB) social work licensing exam. While recognizing the importance of ensuring high standards in the social work profession, I believe there are compelling reasons and emerging research to reconsider the current examination requirements. I come to this knowledge as a social worker with Masters and Doctorate degrees who has had a rewarding and varied career as the founder of a non-profit, a clinical director at a large Behavioral Health agency, a clinical faculty member at the University of New England School of Social Work, the former Vice President of Diversity Equity and Inclusion for the National Association of Social Workers in Washington DC, and finally as the Chief Operating Officer of Social Current, formerly the Council on Accreditation working with over 1500 social service agencies in the United States solving workforce issues while advocating for the needs of our communities. In all these roles, I can attest to the brilliance of social workers as students, interns, and colleagues. Unfortunately, I have seen several of these social workers fail the exam repeatedly, some ultimately leaving the profession discouraged and demoralized. I share their frustration and that of the organizations that are desperate to employ social workers and meet the ever-increasing needs of our communities. I would like to make the following five points:

1. Diversity and Inclusivity:

The ASWB exam creates barriers for individuals from diverse backgrounds. Research has shown that standardized exams can be biased, and removing them could promote greater inclusivity within the social work profession, allowing a more diverse range of voices to contribute. Recent research outlines the concerns raised by the social work communities that the licensure exams may contribute to racial bias in social work licensing as ASWB has historically not reported passing rates by demographic groups until recently (Senreich, 2022). Additionally, these researchers noted that white graduates had significantly higher rates of licensure than those who identified as Black, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, mixed, or other. Furthermore, older Black and Latinx graduates had far lower rates of licensure than their younger counterparts. I will also add that in Maine, older white graduates have a lower pass rate compared to their younger white counterparts.

2. Alternative Assessment Methods:

There is a growing recognition that assessment methods beyond standardized exams can effectively evaluate a candidate's readiness for social work practice. Performance-based assessments, portfolios, and practical evaluations could provide a more comprehensive view of an individual's abilities and

competencies. A recent study published in 2023 demonstrates the validity challenges by using Chat GPT to answer the ASWB exam for the Bachelors, Masters and Clinical levels. The scores of 76%, 78%, and 64% respectively (all fail rates) underscore the low to no confidence that social workers share with regard to the exam (Victor et al., 20023).

### 3. Focus on Practical Skills & Innovations in Education:

Social work is fundamentally a practice-based profession, and assessing candidates based on practical skills and real-world scenarios may be a more accurate reflection of their preparedness for the challenges they will face in their roles. Practical assessments could better capture the essence of social work practice. Social workers who graduate from an accredited social work program demonstrate evidence of achievement of the competencies articulated by the Council on Social Work Education and the social work education community. Emphasizing continuous education, mentorship, supervision, and experiential learning would be more beneficial in shaping competent and compassionate social work professionals than a test.

### 4. Reducing Stress and Anxiety:

Standardized exams can be a significant source of stress and anxiety for candidates, resulting in confirmation bias, a researched phenomenon that describes the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about an individual's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group. This creates a high cognitive load and reduced focus and performance and is noted for an erosion in trust in self. Removing these exams may contribute to a more supportive and nurturing environment for individuals pursuing a career in social work, fostering their well-being and mental health.

### 5. Alignment with Modern Social Work Practices:

The landscape of social work is continuously evolving, and the licensing process should reflect the current realities of the profession. Removing traditional exams can open the door to more agile and responsive assessment methods that align with the dynamic nature of social work practices. A recent research article assessing the impact of the exam on black social workers, social workers where English is not their first language and social workers with disabilities found that alternative methods of assessment would yield better results and truly assess for knowledge and skills (Hirsch, 2023).

In conclusion, I believe that the ASWB social work licensing exam is harming the profession and the communities we serve as a requirement for the LMSW license. We know that we are facing a shortage of healthcare professionals, and social workers are vital members of this group who work in a multitude of community settings, providing invaluable lifesaving services. Eliminating the exam at the LSW and LMSW levels is a progressive step toward fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and effective social work profession. I urge all of you to consider how the passage of this bill aligns with the values and goals of contemporary social work practice.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Arabella Perez, LCSW, DSW

## References

Hirsch, J., DeCarlo, M., Lewis A., & Walker, C. (2023) Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensure: A Critical Review and Social Equity Policy Analysis, *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*.

Osborne, J. W. (2001). Testing Stereotype Threat: Does Anxiety Explain Race and Sex Differences in Achievement? *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 26(3), 291-310–310.

Senreich, E., & Dale, T. (2021) Racial and Age Disparities in Licensing Rates among a Sample of Urban MSW Graduates, *Social Work*, Volume 66, Issue 1, January, Pages 19–28,

Victor, B. G., Kubiak, S., Angell, B., & Perron, B. E. (2023). Time to Move Beyond the ASWB Licensing Exams: Can Generative Artificial Intelligence Offer a Way Forward for Social Work? *Research on Social Work Practice*, 33(5), 511-517.