

LD 1298: The Alternative Pathway to the ASWB Exam for Licensing

What is the proposed Alternative Pathway? A social work applicant who does not successfully pass the ASWB exam can choose to take an additional year of supervised experience. They will be eligible to continue or gain their license after completing an additional year of supervised social work experience and verification from their supervisor at the LMS, LMSW, LMSWcc, and LCSW levels of licensure.

How did we get here? After the initial results were published regarding the inequities in the ASWB exam pass rates among different groups, NASW Maine held extensive conversations with other state chapters and conducted four to five town halls with social workers around the state. They then collaborated with social workers who had been affected by the test, the Office of Professional Licensing, other professional organizations, non-profit behavioral health organizations, and others to craft and propose the bill. The Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services has provided extensive feedback on both the original and current bills, resulting in the current amended version.

Are there other groups supporting this bill? The Council on Social Work Education, the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, and the National Association of Social Work have all called for a pause on the ASWB exam after the pass rate inequities became public. Groups that have stepped up to support include professional organizations, nonprofit advocacy organizations, and coalitions of employers struggling with Maine's mental health workforce issues. Among them are the National Association of Social Workers, Maine Chapter (NASW-ME), Maine Education Association, Maine Primary Care Association, Maine Counselor and Mental Health Therapist Association, Maine Mobile Health, Council on Social Work Education, National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maine, Alliance for Addiction and Mental Health Services, the Consumer Council System of Maine and others.

What other states/advocates have advocated for a testing pause or removal of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) clinical exam? Three states have implemented alternative pathways. Four have eliminated the ASWB exam for various levels of licensure. Six states other than Maine have alternative pathway bills currently being considered. Illinois and Rhode Island's experience is that they more than doubled their annual licenses in the two years following the implementation of their laws.

How will this affect the social work compact? The social work compact allows states to set their own requirements for licensure and then allows social workers to "shore up" by taking the test if they wish to apply for a multi-state license.

Will LCSW social workers who utilize the clinical exam alternative be able to join insurance panels and bill for services? Yes. The standard used is that the state licensing authority certifies that the social worker is a licensed clinical social worker. We have existing models, including those that were grandparented in, who continue to fully practice as licensed social workers without having passed the ASWB clinical exam.

Is this going to create a public safety issue? No. In fact, there is no data to show that the ASWB clinical exam has been successful in determining competency or protecting the public.

How does this affect social workers who have already passed the test and are licensed? It doesn't— their license will remain the same. An existing LCSW will see no difference in their practice if an alternative to the clinical exam is created in Illinois.

Who will provide supervision? The current licensing statute prescribes supervisors at each level of licensure as follows: LSWs can be supervised by an LMSW or LCSW. LMSWs can be supervised by a LMSW. LMSWccs can be supervised by LCSW, LCPC, Psychologist or Psychiatrist. No supervision is prescribed for LCSWs.

Are we creating two different levels of licenses? No, we are just creating another path for licensure. Regardless of whether an individual passes a clinical exam or completes the additional 3,000 hours of supervised work experience, all recipients will receive the same level of licensure.

Why not reform the test? As the test will remain and likely be the primary path to licensure, advocates and stakeholders have an interest in ensuring the test is reformed. However, that process will happen within ASWB, will take years, and may never materialize. Furthermore, there is a general consensus (even by the testing body) that there needs to be alternatives to the clinical exam to address bias, test anxiety, and accommodate individuals with language barriers.

Would the state be open to accepting other ideas in the future? Yes. National discussions on reforming the exam are expected to progress over the next three to four years, according to the ASWB. Maine will be watching to see if changes or additional paths are needed. The amended version has the alternative pathway expiring on March 1, 2031, after which we will be able to review, evaluate, and make recommendations on the process.

Does the Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation oppose it? No, the department has worked closely with us on the current version to implement the Alternative Pathway, ensuring public safety and providing the necessary resources to facilitate the alternative pathway process.

Does this lower the standards for social work? No, LD 1298 is just an alternative to the clinical exam. This alternate path is a longer one, requiring the applicant to work under the guidance and support of existing licensed clinical professionals, which can be an even more rigorous standard than someone with strong testing skills.

To persons who are opposed to removing the ASWB exam, as they were able to pass it or believe it compromises the Social Work profession:

Whenever we make changes, there will be some resistance. The ASWB test has been shown to be highly biased against multiple groups and has never been proven to assess competence. Some have worked incredibly hard to pass this biased test. We believe that creating an alternate path that sits parallel to the exam does not diminish the accomplishment of those who passed the exam or the perceived competence of the profession. It is an equitable way to address very real challenges with the current licensing system and is one way to help address Maine's critical behavioral health access and workforce shortages.