

NASW ME Testimony on LD 1298: An Act Establishing Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensing

Good morning, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

As President of the National Association of Social Workers, Maine Chapter (NASW ME), I am here representing NASW ME's support of LD 1298, establishing alternative pathways to social work licensing. This bill is one program with minimal fiscal impact that can help address our current behavioral health workforce shortage. It has the potential to more than double the number of new clinically licensed social workers entering the workforce, based on experiences in Rhode Island and Illinois, which saw initial surges after the passage of alternative pathway legislation from the backlog of persons not having passed the exam.

The behavioral health workforce shortage in Maine is real. Over 10,000 people wait for counseling services for 32 weeks or more (7-8 months), as described in our Behavioral Health Workforce and Access Report that has been uploaded to today's testimony website. Organizations report 22% vacancy rates for counseling (Behavioral Health Report, 2024). Residential units are closing. Community agencies are pulling out from providing counseling in schools. Children wait 13 months in emergency rooms for placement. Focus group participants report that *"we used to have three applicants for every one position. We now have three positions for every three applicants."* Rural services providers report, *"We had to shut down our outpatient therapy program because I could ...not hire anyone."* *"I posted a position for twelve months and maybe had one applicant, who wasn't a viable fit."*

Our licensing bill provides an alternative pathway that helps to ensure competency through further supervision and public safety through its jurisprudence exam's laws, regulations, and ethics sections. Despite over 40 years of existence, the ASWB exam has not been shown to distinguish between competent and incompetent practitioners. The one study from previous testimony that provided evidence about the exam protecting the public's safety was from an unpublished doctoral dissertation about an exploratory study of licensing complaints in Kansas (Kinderknecht, 1995). Exploratory studies help describe issues. They do not provide conclusive evidence.

The pass rate disparities cannot be ameliorated by changing the questions to be more racially congruent or offering it in French. A New York Times article described some of the contributing factors that contribute to the pass rate disparities of any standardized test, leading to the author's premise that lower Black and Latino pass rates don't make a test racist. He cites the National Education Association and the work of anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath, who studied how the differences in how language is used with children in white middle-class families, white working-class families, and black middle-class families set these groups up for disparate pass/fail rates in standardized tests. He concludes that standardized tests have become instruments of racism and a biased system.

Drs. Kim and Joo recent publications provide further understanding of the complex factors leading the pass rate disparities in the ASWB exam, describing *“diminished, yet persistent effects when other determinants are controlled.”*

“Examinees from historically marginalized groups earned their educational degrees and took their first licensing exam at significantly older ages than their white counterparts...and had significantly more years of work experience, typically in non-direct service jobs, which may not have helped them advance their social work competence.” (Report No. 1)

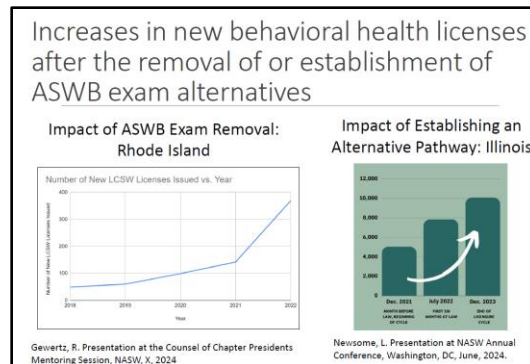
“Since licensing exams occur at the end of an individual’s educational and training journey, the results are likely to reflect cumulative educational and training opportunities and disadvantages experienced throughout their lifetime.” (Report No. 2)

“Group differences in exam....reflect persistent inequalities and segregation in our schools, communities, and workplaces that disproportionately and adversely affect people from low-income and historically marginalized backgrounds.” (Report No. 3)

The Alternative Pathway bill provides an equitable way to help address Maine’s behavioral health workforce shortage. Maine needs a healthy behavioral health workforce to keep Mainers healthy. A healthy workforce contributes to a healthy economy. Please vote to pass this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

Julie M. Schirmer, LCSW, ACSW
President, Board of Directors, NASW ME



References:

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