

PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY IN MICHIGAN: *Reject The Social Work Licensure Modernization Act*

Oppose House Bills 5184 & 5185

Overview

The SWLMA removes the examination requirement for social workers at all license levels. This legislation was created in response to the release of Association of Social Work Boards' (ASWB) 2022 Exam Pass Rate Analysis that demonstrates disparities in pass rates, which disproportionately affect people of color, as well as lower income individuals. While the findings of the ASWB data are concerning and require a thoughtful and holistic response, **removing the examination requirement from the social work licensing process would put the public at risk** (particularly the vulnerable and marginalized), devalue the social work profession (potentially resulting in decreased compensation from employers and insurance companies), defer the responsibility of assessing competency to individual college faculty and supervisors (who are equally susceptible to practicing institutional and covert discrimination), and result in social work having the lowest licensing standards of all the mental health professions. **The Social Work Modernization Act is an impulsive and simplistic response to a complex issue and will result in dire consequences for Michiganders and social workers.**

The value and responsibility of social workers is significant. This is how the National Association of Social Workers summarized what social workers do and who employs them:

"According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), **professional social workers are the nation's largest group of mental health services providers.** There are more clinically trained social workers—over 200,000—than psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurses combined. Federal law and the National Institutes of Health recognize social work as one of five core mental health professions. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs employs more than 13,000 professional social workers. It is one of the largest employers of MSWs in the United States. More than 40% of all disaster mental health volunteers trained by the American Red Cross are professional social workers. There are hundreds of social workers in national, state, and local elected offices. These include Sen. Debbie Stabenow (MI), Rep. Karen Bass (CA-37), Rep. Barbara Lee (CA-13), Rep. Susan Davis (CA-53), and Rep. Sylvia Garcia (TX-29). Today, almost 50 special interest organizations contribute to the vitality and influence of the social work profession. There are social work groups for educators and researchers, as well as organizations for practitioners in health care leadership, nephrology, oncology, child welfare,

schools, prisons, courts, and many other settings. *Professional social workers are found in every facet of community life—in schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, senior centers, elected office, private practices, prisons, military, corporations, and in numerous public and private agencies that serve individuals and families in need.* Many also serve as social and community service directors.” (NASW News)

Responses to The Arguments for The Legislation

1.

“According to the Community Mental Health Association, CMH organizations are experiencing 20-40% vacancies in social work positions. Some of these shortages are attributed to an inability for some of their staff and candidates for social work positions to complete the current social work licensure process.” (NASW, 2023)

Response: Many of these shortages may be due to reasons other than inability to pass the examination, such as inadequate compensation and benefits. One of the many risks to eliminating the examination requirement is that the profession of social work will be further devalued. In positions with such great responsibility, such as working with community mental health, the standards should be high. The best way to fill vacant positions is not to lower the standards, it is to provide incentives.

2.

“Additionally, the ASWB exam that is currently required has shown significant racial, age, and language bias, with nearly 70% of Black test takers unable to pass the exam the first time. We need social workers who represent their communities and clients.” (NASW, 2023)

Response: Efforts must be made at every level to address disparities and biases. **Addressing institutional discrimination is a complex and ongoing process that involves both systemic and individual efforts. For a profession that prides itself on finding creative solutions to complex problems, eliminating the examination requirement completely in response to this data is a hasty response, an oversimplified “fix”, and an unexamined solution.**

The disparities between white test-takers and people of color appear to be greater for the ASWB Master’s Examination than they are for the Clinical Examination. The ASWB Master’s Examination is not required for licensure in Michigan. Refer to Table B2 in Appendix B and Table C2 in Appendix C of the 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis for the first-time pass rate numbers by year. (ASWB, 2022)

The disparities in pass rates for the ASWB Clinical Examination due to race appear to be decreasing. The analysis states, “first-time pass rates for white test-takers have remained relatively stable during the four-year period” and **“Black test-takers displayed some of the most significant growth in first-time pass**

rates, increasing 7 percent from 2018 to 2021.” Refer to page 14 of the 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis for more detailed data and analysis. (ASWB, 2022)

3.

“Social work has many other measurements of expertise, including graduate school, internships, and supervision after graduation.” (NASW, 2023)

Response: The modifications proposed by the SWLMA would shift the responsibility for evaluating readiness for licensure to professors, universities, and supervisors who carry their own biases, leading to continued discrimination within the assessment process.

Universities bear the responsibility of assessing whether an individual meets the standards to pass a class and to graduate a degree program, however, they do not assess an individual’s cumulative knowledge across the wide-ranging content areas of social work. Universities also do not endorse an individual’s readiness for independent practice or an individual’s competency to provide clinical supervision.

The completion of required supervised practice is only affirmed through a signed form. There is currently not adequate oversight to the provision of clinical supervision in Michigan. The only current requirement for a social worker to provide clinical supervision is to hold a full social work license (currently “LMSW-clinical”). Currently, there are no mandated additional educational or training prerequisites for clinical supervisors. Furthermore, **there exists a lack of standardization in the field of clinical supervision, and a formalized process for ensuring the quality and effectiveness of such supervision is absent.**

Consequently, there is a notable absence of mechanisms to guarantee that the clinical supervision being offered encompasses pertinent and comprehensive education and skill enhancement.

4.

“In a time where Michigan and the nation are in a behavioral health crisis, it is important that we are investing in our behavioral health workforce. At its core, the Social Work Licensure Modernization Act aims to increase the number of licensed social workers in Michigan to help address workforce shortages, reduce unnecessary and/or problematic barriers, and bring Michigan in step with other national license legislative changes where these new tiers and removal of a biased exam would put us in line with how other states are already structured.” (NASW, 2023)

Response: There are other ways to address workforce shortages, such as incentivizing social work. **Sacrificing standards and quality to increase quantity is not what vulnerable individuals in Michigan need or deserve.** These “problematic barriers” are safeguards and controls to decrease the likelihood of doing harm or re-traumatizing individuals, and to promote public health and safety. While few states have proposed removing the examination requirement, almost all states currently require the examination for licensure.

Other Professions

Research has indicated that both the United States Medical Licensing Examinations (“Medical Board Exams”) and The Uniform Bar Examination (“The Bar”) may be discriminatory. Pass rates vary among different racial and socioeconomic groups. Historically, Black, Hispanic, and lower income individuals are less likely to pass. Additionally, the cost of these examinations, their study materials, and their preparatory courses, are quite costly, contributing to more stress and less accessibility for lower income individuals.

Despite the data, the requirement of licensing examinations remains part of the process of becoming a practicing physician or lawyer in the United States. Efforts to address the concerns of discrimination include ongoing research, revisions to exam content, and the development of additional assessment methods. The examination requirements have not been removed from the process of becoming a practicing lawyer or physician in the United States because **it is essential that those entering these professions have a minimum level of competence and knowledge**. Many people would not consider receiving services from a lawyer or physician who has not passed the licensing examination.

While specifics vary by state, the licensing process for the other mental health professions, including **psychologists, mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, and professional counselors, require passing an examination.**

Implications & Danger to The Public:

Particularly to Vulnerable Individuals
and Marginalized Groups

The Social Work Modernization Act would allow social workers to participate in the following high-stakes tasks without passing an examination to demonstrate a minimum level of competency and knowledge:

working as mental health professionals (such as psychotherapists), providing mental health diagnoses, providing clinical social work supervision to social work trainees pursuing licensure, participating in the processes and decisions of family court, assessing individuals at-risk of suicide or homicide, providing crisis intervention to those victim of human trafficking or domestic violence, de-escalating mental health crises, assessing court-ordered individuals and managing risk to the community, intervening in elder abuse, providing substance abuse treatment, assessing child abuse / neglect, and more.

The clinical licensing examination supports public health by requiring that clinical social workers have adequate knowledge about diagnosis, treatment planning, theoretical frameworks, de-escalation, crisis intervention, safety protocols, ethical decision-making, and more.

Possible Approaches

to Addressing Disparities in Pass Rates

While this petition is in objection to the SWLMA and not intended to act as a comprehensive plan to increase equity, below are some potential alternative actions that could aid in addressing the current challenges of the examination:

- Address institutionalized racism in the American education systems
- Create additional paths to licensure for students that demonstrate test-taking challenges, such as regulated standards of the provision of social work supervision
- Provide free / low-cost study materials
- Provide free / low-cost examination preparation
- Create a voucher program that assists with the cost of registering for the examination for lower income individuals
- Strengthen diverse recruitment practices to hire more BIPOC faculty members in Social Work programs at universities
- Encourage more BIPOC professionals to serve as item writers for the ASWB examinations
- Critically evaluate the licensing examinations on a regular basis and make changes accordingly. In a statement, the ASWB committed to continuing to improve the examinations:

“The data release offers social work a historic opportunity. From the regulatory side, ASWB is committed to leading change in collaboration with social work partner communities toward addressing the systemic and institutional factors that disproportionately affect Black licensure candidates and those of other historically marginalized groups. ASWB is actively seeking short- and long-term solutions by taking concerted actions:

- Exploring how the professional standard of competency is defined and measured
- Researching and understanding upstream factors accounting for differences in pass rates
- Revisiting the exam structure to increase equitable access, including possible alternative assessment formats
- Providing multiple avenues for engagement and respectful collaboration with the diverse voices of individuals and organizations, including educators, practitioners, and regulators

ASWB will do this work in full alignment with our mission and purpose and is committed to offering regular updates on our progress. Together, we can work to make social work more equitable and to ensure the profession reflects values of antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.” (ASWB, 2023)

Conclusion & *Contact Information*

An immediate and surface response to a complex problem poses danger to our clients and communities. We urge lawmakers, community members, healthcare professionals, behavioral health professionals, mental health professionals, and all who care about the well-being of Michiganders to oppose House Bill 5184 and House Bill 5185.

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To visit our website, use the QR code.

References

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Support the Social Work Licensure Modernization Act - NASW MI. Voter Voice. (n.d.). <https://www.votervoice.net/NASWMI/Campaigns/107864/Respond>