

**House Bills 5184 & 5185. Social Work Licensure Modernization Act Testimony**  
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Good morning, Chair Brabec and members of the Behavioral Health Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of House Bills 5184 and 5185.

My name is Duane Breijak, a Lansing resident, licensed macro social worker, and I have the honor today of representing the profession of social work through my position as the Executive Director of the Michigan Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. NASW-Michigan is the largest organization supporting and advocating for the social work profession in Michigan and across the United States.

Our country faces an unprecedented mental health crisis among people of all ages, and with it a huge shortage of providers. In Michigan, social workers are the largest providers of behavioral health services, with over 30,000 licensed professionals and an additional 6,500 students completing their social work degrees across the state. Social workers are the only mental health profession to have licensed individuals in every Michigan county, and are found in every facet of community life; including schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, senior centers, elected office, private practices, prisons, military, corporations, and in numerous public and private agencies.

Even before the pandemic, rates of substance use, depression and anxiety were inching higher across the country. But the grief, trauma, loss, and physical isolation of the last several years have driven Americans to a breaking point, compounded with the often polarized political climate and the increased connection we all have daily with our global community, where we witness war, destruction, and death on almost a daily basis. Our youth have been particularly impacted, as losses from COVID and disruptions in routines and relationships have led to increased hopelessness, social isolation, anxiety, learning loss, and suicidal ideation.

We need to build up our Michigan behavioral health community to meet the needs of today, and to be prepared for the future we anticipate. HB 5184 and 5185 helps us make huge progress immediately.

Michigan officially passed our licensing law in 2004, just under 20 years ago. At that time we officially became the 50th, and final, state to create a path to licensure. That licensure package was essential in our state to support our profession and create title protection, and was the result of nearly 40 years of advocacy from NASW, our schools of social work, and the larger social work community. Over the last 19 years, we have learned much about our current licensure system, worked to resolve kinks as best as possible, and heard from thousands of licensees across the state about barriers and possible solutions. Over the last decade, I have provided hundreds of licensure workshops to students, faculty, and recent grads across our state, reinforcing the importance of licensure, fielding questions and concerns, and making sure our newest professional are as prepared as possible to start their careers off strong.

Today, you will hear from a few of my amazing social work colleagues about how issues within the current licensure process are exacerbating the behavioral health shortages we are experiencing all across Michigan. Specifically, you will hear how the social work exam has no correlation with competence, and how it is actually preventing qualified BIPOC, older, deaf, blind, and hard of hearing, and English as a second language social workers from working and staying in the profession.

This legislation is the first time since licensure was passed nearly two decades ago that allow us to make substantial improvements to the process, and in turn increase the number of licensed social workers in Michigan.

It will accomplish that in two important ways:

- **By updating Michigan's licensure tiers to mirror almost all of the United States**
  - Michigan is the only state to utilize a limited license process, which has created complications in social workers ability to bill for services
  - With the huge increases in telehealth use in the last several years, having consistent credentials is more important than ever before, so that social workers can have easier times with reciprocity and seeking multi-state licensing
- **And through eliminating unnecessary regulations, including a biased examination**
  - In August of 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released 10 years worth of testing data, after decades of advocacy by social workers, licensing boards, and organizations. The data confirmed years of anecdotal information, that all levels of the exam have large disparities in pass rate by race, age, and language.
  - One statistic that stands out from that data released highlights that only 446 out of 1582 black test takers in Michigan passed their clinical exam on the first attempt in the last ten years. From those that failed the exam, this was nearly \$300,000 of fees that were paid that did not lead to professional advancement or an advanced credential. We know that our black social workers are on average having to take the exam on average 3 more times than their white colleagues, adding an additional \$520 of exam fees as well. This is a economic justice issue and raises concerns of exploitation on the wallets of our communities of color.
  - Additionally, if you look at the most recent 3 years of data available (2018-2021), test-takers across the board are doing significantly worse than in the previous 7 years, highlighting growing disparities. White test-takers' eventual pass rates dropped from 89% to 82% and our Black test-takers pass rates dropped from 51% to 41%. This drop in pass rates not surprisingly correlates directly with when states were forced to change their rules to require licensees to have all of their supervised hours complete before they could sit for the exam. Michigan pushed back hard on these changes, as we know the exam does not get easier with more years of experience.
  - In the more than a year since the damning data was released, still nothing has been done by ASWB to assist current test takers or reduce disparities, even after specific and reasonable suggestions were provided by NASW, the Council on Social Work Education, and the National Deans and Directors.

While it may feel radical for some, removing standardized tests as a measure of competence is not new and is becoming more and more regular amongst institutions of higher education as well as in regulation in a variety of professions. In fact, more than one third of Michigan's current licensed social worker population did not take an ASWB exam when grandparented into the process in 2005. These are many of our state's most experienced clinicians, agency directors, and supervisors. We don't view them as less competent or less ethical because they did not take this exam.

It is critical to acknowledge that even without the ASWB exam, social workers have a high bar for practice and licensure. This includes earning nearly 1000 hours of supervised practicum experience, graduating from an accredited school of social work, and then fulfilling an additional 4,000 hours of advanced work under the direct supervision of a licensed social worker once one enters the profession. Michigan's required 4,000 hours of supervised work experience is the most in the nation.

Then once fully licensed, all social workers are mandated to earn 45 hours of continuing education under approved courses during each renewal cycle, for their entire career. For comparison, in Michigan our licensed counselors are not required to earn any continuing education once licensed.

Licensing exists to protect the public. HBs 5184 and 5185 strengthens our state by bringing in hundreds, if not thousands, of more individuals into regulation, and allows incredibly talented, competent, and ethically-trained professionals to remain and thrive in their jobs and communities. This legislation comes after years of local, state, and national meetings around social work regulation and will only advance Michigan's high standards for social work practice.

Thank you for helping Michigan be a national leader and for supporting the critical work social workers are doing across the state. House Bills 5184 and 5185 will fix major flaws in our current licensure process and I urge your support.

I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

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