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Testimony on H-5158, Licensed Clinical Social Workers House Corporations February 4, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Solomon and members of the House Corporations Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I serve as the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

I strongly urge your favorable consideration and passage of **H-5158 – An Act Relating to Businesses and Professions – License Procedure for Social Workers**, sponsored by Representative Shallcross Smith and co-sponsored by Representatives Casimiro, Ajello, Nardone, Fogarty, Fellela, Hull, Alzate, Diaz, and Handy.

This legislation would repeal the examination requirement for individuals seeking licensure as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). Eliminating this barrier is a critical **public health intervention** that will address two pressing issues: **racial disparities in standardized testing and the severe shortage of social workers in Rhode Island’s healthcare system.**

Standardized Testing as a Public Health Barrier

There is overwhelming evidence that standardized testing disproportionately disadvantages candidates of color and non-native English speakers. The National Education Association has acknowledged that standardized tests have historically reinforced racial bias, and the data reflect this reality.¹ A **2022 Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) report** found that between 2018 and 2021:

- **Only 45% of Black first-time test takers passed**, compared to **83.9% of white test takers.**
- **Latino/a test takers passed at a rate of 65.1%**, and **Asian test takers at 72%.²**
- Older test takers and individuals whose **primary language is not English** faced pass rate disparities of approximately **20 percentage points.²**

Despite completing **accredited social work programs** and demonstrating clinical competency through fieldwork and supervision, many qualified candidates—particularly **those who represent and serve marginalized communities**—are being systematically excluded from the profession due to a biased testing requirement. As New York Assembly Member Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas stated, *“Standardized licensing exams do nothing to improve the quality of care but rather keep diverse social workers out of our communities when we need them the most.”³*

Addressing Rhode Island’s Public Health Workforce Crisis

Rhode Island is experiencing a **catastrophic shortage of social workers**, particularly in **state hospitals, community mental health centers, and crisis intervention services**.^{4,5} In 2024, community mental health providers in Rhode Island were formally identified as **facing a workforce crisis**, leaving many of the state’s most vulnerable populations—including children—without access to essential behavioral health services.

As Representative Caldwell stated, *“Some of the most vulnerable individuals in our state, including many children, are suffering from their inability to access the services they need because our community providers simply don’t have the staff they need to serve them. This is one way we can help keep social services agencies staffed.”*⁶

The Critical Role of Social Workers in Public Health

Social workers **are essential to our healthcare system**.⁷ They provide:

- **Mental health and crisis intervention services**
- **Patient advocacy and care coordination**
- **Support for individuals with chronic illness, trauma, and substance use disorders**
- **Health education and resource navigation**

Eighty percent of social workers deliver services in communities of color, and research consistently shows that the most **effective social workers reflect the lived experiences of the populations they serve**.⁸ Repealing this exam requirement will allow Rhode Island to **retain a diverse, skilled, and community-based workforce** at a time when it is needed most.

Conclusion

House Bill 5158 is a **public health imperative**. Social workers undergo **rigorous academic training and supervised fieldwork**, demonstrating their competency **long before taking an exam**.³ Removing this unnecessary barrier will not only **increase the number of qualified social workers in our state** but will also **enhance access to equitable, culturally responsive, and life-saving mental health care**.

For these reasons, I **strongly urge the passage of H-5158** to ensure Rhode Island’s healthcare system has the workforce it needs to meet the growing demands of our communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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3. Jefferson. González-Rojas reintroduces legislation to eliminate social worker testing requirement. *City & State NY* (2023).
4. NRI. *State Mental Health Agency Workforce Shortages, 2022*. https://www.nri-inc.org/media/hz2lygyh/workforce-shortages_final.pdf (2022).
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6. Whitty, M. R. Bill to help address social worker shortage becomes law. (2022).
7. Asanga, N. The Importance of Social Workers in Healthcare. *Advance Community Health* <https://advancechc.org/social-workers-in-healthcare/behavioral-health/> (2023).
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