

Maria Friedman
Feb 4, 2025

In Support of H5158 Relating To Business and Professions - License Procedure for Social Workers

Dear House Corporations Committee,

As both the Secretary of the Board of The National Association of Social Workers - Rhode Island Chapter (NASW-RI) and as a licensed social worker myself, I strongly support the passage of House Bill 5158. There are several reasons I am in support of eliminating the licensure requirement. Firstly, there is a current crisis in Rhode Island and nationally of a shortage of mental health professionals, including social workers, in front-line roles at agencies and organizations providing direct services to clients in need. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing gaps in mental health needs of various vulnerable populations in the state. A huge part of this shortage of workers is that many agencies and programs will not hire social workers (who possess a Master's of Social Work) unless they possess a license (LCSW). **In other words, there are hundreds of local qualified mental health professionals who could be working on the front-lines now to address the mental health needs of our communities, but instead they cannot fill roles without first passing a license exam (LCSW) that is biased in nature and lacks cultural accessibility.**

As a graduate of the Masters of Social Work (MSW) program of Rhode Island College, we learned about barriers to accessibility. One of those barriers that the exam poses is the fact that it is not offered in any language other than English. This makes it very difficult for graduates for whom English is their second language to be able to pass this exam. Many other standardized exams are offered in other languages. This is especially problematic given the fact that there is a high population of both graduates and the general population in Rhode Island who prefer Spanish, Portugues, Cape Verdean Creole, or other languages.

Additionally, the social work licensure exam often lacks cultural humility and is not relevant to the actual way that social workers and other mental health practitioners practice in the real-world. During my time in the MSW program, we were told by multiple faculty that the way the exam is structured and the way they want you to answer the questions is not in alignment with actual practice recommendations. Moreover, it has been found that there is a greater proportion of graduates of color failing the licensure exam compared to their white counterparts. **This is especially problematic given the increasing ethnic and racial diversity of our state, and the need for more practitioners of color working in agencies and organizations today. Therefore, the validity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity of the exam is in question and should not be the barrier preventing a competent professional from practicing with clients.** We are open to requiring licensure in the future should a more relevant and culturally sensitive exam come forth.

Furthermore, there are many other professions that do not require an exam in order to be licensed coming out of a rigorous Master's program. Accredited MSW programs in Rhode Island, such as the one I completed, already require over 480 hours during the first year and over 600 hours in the second year of supervised field hours. **These 1000+ hours of practice in the real-world, along with required field supervision and evaluations, are sufficient to show a social worker's competence and ability. There is no evidence showing that the quality of services provided improve after one obtains a license (passes the exam).**

We urge you to support this bill so that mental health professionals, in particular social workers, will be able to execute their mission of serving the needs of vulnerable populations at much greater levels across the state. **In other words, through the elimination of the licensure requirement, access to services will**

increase since more social workers will be able to work in direct service roles with clients, including mental health counseling. Eliminating the requirement for licensure in order to be hired or to practice social work will vastly improve the mental health outcomes of our communities, and in turn improve the quality of life, personal development, and economic success of our communities. When people can access the care they need from professionals without having to be on waiting lists for months, especially if they are going through a severe crisis, they will be able to in turn grow in many areas of their life and contribute more fully to our society.

Sincerely,

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