

# UMB News


## Social Work Dean Testifies to Reduce Licensing Barrier

February 24, 2025 | By [Charles Schelle](#)

[University of Maryland School of Social Work](#) (UMSSW) Dean **Judy L. Postmus, PhD, ACSW**, testified before the Maryland Senate Finance Committee to endorse a bill intended to reduce barriers for entry-level social workers in the state.




*UMSSW Dean Judy Postmus, right, testifies in front of the Maryland Senate Finance Committee.*

[Senate Bill 379](#)  would remove the requirement that bachelor's (BSW) and master's degree social work (MSW) graduates from an accredited program pass the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) licensing exam to practice. These licensed social workers would still be required to practice under supervision.

"The MSW program, which our school has, is one of the most rigorous available combining intensive academic course work with hands-on field training," Postmus said at the Feb. 4 hearing. "Our students complete extensive classes in human behavior, policy, interventions, and ethical practices.

"More importantly, they engage in hundreds of supervised hours in real-world settings working directly with individuals, families, and communities, under the guidance of experienced social work professionals. This rigorous preparation is far more indicative of their ability to succeed as social workers than a single standardized exam, which has shown to disproportionately disadvantage certain groups including Black test takers, older adults, and non-native English speakers throughout the country," Postmus added.

A [2024 Maryland Health Care Commission \(MHCC\) report](#)  estimated that the state needs to hire 32,800 behavioral health workers by 2028 to meet the current demand. One tool to alleviate that demand is by examining the licensure requirements for entry-level social workers in Maryland.

"In Maryland, we need social workers in our schools, in our hospitals, in our health care agencies, in government agencies including Veterans Affairs and the military, community development and outreach agencies, our county, state, and legal agencies as well as clinics and counseling centers," state Sen. Mary Washington, representing the 43rd District in Baltimore City, said in support of her bill.

The MHCC report found only 6 percent of MSW workers were employed as licensed social workers one year after graduation.

“Maryland needs more social workers — not additional barriers that prevent highly qualified, well-trained graduates from serving our communities,” Postmus said.

The ASWB licensing exam has been called into question by groups in several states, including the [National Association of Social Workers \(NASW\)](#), because of the disparities in pass rates by race, age, and disability. For the MSW exam, 93 percent of white students passed the exam the first time while 55.5 percent of Black students and 79 percent of Hispanic students passed on their first attempt from 2011 to 2021, according to ASWB data.

“There is no evidence that the exam meaningfully assesses competency,” said Karla Abney, PhD, LMSW, president of the Greater Washington Society of Clinical Social Workers and chair of the Maryland Work Group on Social Work Licensing Requirements.

The new requirements in SB 379 stem from recommendations from the [Workgroup on Social Worker Requirements for Licensure](#), which was established by the Maryland General Assembly during the 2023 legislative session. That workgroup, which includes Postmus as a member, examined the licensing process for social workers, including examining disparities in the exam pass rates among various demographics to determine bias.

The bill maintains key safeguards including requiring accredited education, supervised practice, and continuing education, Postmus said.

“These ensure public safety while making our licensing process more equitable and inclusive,” the dean said. “Ten states have never ever used the exam for their licensing process.”

The bill does not impact the exam required for licensed clinical social workers (LCSW-C), social workers in Maryland who can independently diagnose mental health disorders and provide psychotherapy.

UMSSW alumna **Rachel Doyle, MSW ‘11, LICSW**, supervises and mentors MSW students at Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington. Doyle shared at the hearing one example of an intern who excelled with clients but took multiple attempts to pass the licensing exam, adding that she has seen a racial disparity at her practice for first-time pass rates.

“When my students struggle to pass their exam, it’s another \$230 fee while being underemployed and it’s more time they can’t help clients at the full level they’re capable of and at the full salary they deserve,” Doyle said.

Four states have removed the exam requirement, including Illinois, which doubled its licensed social workers (LSW) in two years without safety issues, according to the NASW. An Illinois LSW is equivalent to the licensed master social worker (LMSW) in Maryland.

UMSSW alumnus **Dan Rabbit, MSW ‘10**, policy director at Behavioral Health Systems Baltimore, said adopting Illinois’ move would be transformative in addressing Maryland’s mental health crisis.

Anna McPhatter, dean at Morgan State University School of Social Work, joined Postmus in support of the bill.

“When I moved in Maryland in the late ‘80s working at a School of Social Work, I heard from students a lot about their experience with the exam, so I decided to take it,” McPhatter said.

She passed the exam by only two points, McPhatter added.

“I began to really understand the horror of students who take the exam over and over again having to expend lots of their resources to do so,” McPhatter said. “The issue of being well prepared didn’t really fit.”

NASW CEO Anthony Estreet endorsed the bill, which includes expanding the state’s social work board. Estreet proposed an amendment to the bill offering the exam to be optional for those who wish to take it.

The bill is awaiting further Senate committee action. It is crossfiled with House Bill 1521, which had its first reading on Feb. 20.

## How Social Workers Are Licensed in Maryland

Each state has its own process to license social workers.

In Maryland, each licensure requires a background check and a submitted application to the [State Board of Social Work Examiners](#). Maryland requires a license to practice social work, regardless of the level. These are requirements beyond what is required for graduation, including supervised internship experience.

The letters that represent each social worker's credentials following their name can be confusing for those not familiar with the field, and that alphabet soup can also change in each state.

These are the following types of Maryland licensed social workers:

**Licensed Bachelor Social Worker (LBSW)**

- Works under supervision.
- Provides case management, crisis intervention, and organizational support.
- Requires a BSW degree and currently an ASWB exam (SB 379 would remove this exam).

**Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW)**

- Can work independently in case management, advocacy, policy work, and crisis response.
- Needs supervision for clinical screenings and psychotherapy-related case management.
- Requires an MSW degree and currently an ASWB exam (SB 379 would remove this exam).

**Licensed Certified Social Worker-Clinical (LCSW-C)**

- Can diagnose mental health disorders, provide therapy, and supervise other social workers.
- Requires 3,000 hours of supervised clinical experience.
- Must pass the ASWB Clinical Exam.

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

