

# Expanding Social Work Licensure to Strengthen the Homelessness Service Workforce

## *Author*

CAITLIN MELLO

## SUMMARY

Homelessness services require appropriate funding, access to necessary resources, and experienced staff to effectively connect individuals with housing and services through a Housing First lens. This policy brief examines part of the solution to the third requirement: trained and experienced staff.

## PUBLIC PROBLEM

Finding experienced social workers to act as caseworkers for a population with increasingly complex needs is a challenge. Staff turnover remains high due to low wages and significant burnout. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates pay for permanent supportive housing staff is approximately \$42,912 annually; for emergency shelter staff, it is \$27,830 (Dubois & Oliva, 2023). With an average cost of living marked around \$49,255 to afford a one-bedroom apartment (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2023), these wages are not competitive, nor do they attract new staff to fill the gaps of an aging workforce. In addition to salary, high burnout rates result from working with individuals in desperate situations and having limited resources to solve increasingly complex problems (Fleetwood, 2010; Waagemakers Schiff & Lane, 2019). This brief will look at means to expand workforce licensure through appropriately applying requirements to ensure the workforce is accessible to and reflective of service

users. Currently, social work licensure requires, in most cases, a bachelor's or master's degree and passage of a costly licensure exam that has produced racially biased outcomes (Apgar & Nienow, 2023; Mina, 2022; Nienow et al., 2023). With increased access to licensure, homelessness services could have a clear path for professional development, increased access to funding streams for salary increases and additional benefits, and a more diverse cohort of caseworkers that reflects the population of individuals experiencing homelessness.

## TRENDS

In recent years, there has been a shortage of social workers in homelessness services. It has notably impacted program capacity in several large Continuums of Care (CoC)<sup>1</sup>, including recently in Washington, D.C. The Washington Post reported in February 2023 that hiring one licensed supervisor in a homelessness outreach organization would increase the program's caseload by 125 clients. This number means that 125 people experiencing homelessness would have quicker access to resources, housing, and case management to connect them with appropriate services (Swenson & Lang, 2023). The profession needs to dramatically improve access to licensure to ensure that these gaps are filled promptly, programs can utilize all the available resources, and people experiencing homelessness can efficiently connect to housing.

Social work licensure as a form of professional

<sup>1</sup>A CoC is the governing structure designed to coordinate homelessness response by directing community-wide planning and effective utilization of resources.

development and increased access to funding is not accessible to all and often does not reflect the populations experiencing and most at risk of homelessness. Homelessness is disproportionately experienced by Black, Indigenous, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander communities within the United States, according to the 2022 United States Point in Time data (de Sousa et al., 2022; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Culturally competent and specific care would call for providers that reflect those statistics. While graduating social workers are becoming more reflective of the populations served, White women remain approximately 80 percent of the workforce (Salsberg et al., 2020). Exam requirements for licensure disproportionately favor White test takers, with the most recent data showing roughly a 90 percent pass rate, as opposed to a 40 percent pass rate for Black test takers (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022). Further disparity could be found for individuals who spoke English as a second language. Included below is a table outlining the demographics of exam passage in 2022. Beyond testing, Black social workers carry more significant debt burdens upon leaving MSW programs, according to recent data (Salsberg et al., 2020;

Saunders et al., 2016). To have a workforce reflective of community needs, testing and expensive higher education should not remain the only way to access professional social work as a career.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

**Homelessness is disproportionately experienced by Black, Indigenous, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander communities within the United States, according to the 2022 United States Point in Time data (de Sousa et al., 2022; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Culturally competent and specific care would call for providers that reflect those statistics.**

### *Elimination of Exam Requirements*

Following the release of data on the pass rates of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB)

**Table 1:**  
*First-time Pass Rates of ASWB Exams by Race/Ethnicity*

	Clinical Exam Pass Rates	Masters Exam Pass Rate	Bachelors Exam Pass Rate
Asian	79.7%	75.5%	64.2%
Black	57.0%	51.9%	38.3%
Hispanic/Latino	76.6%	71.2%	58.5%
Multiracial	86.6%	85.1%	78.4%
Native American/ Indigenous Peoples	73.5%	72.2%	70.9%
White	90.7%	90.8%	81.6%

*Note: Percentages are pulled from the ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis and includes data from 2018-2021.*

exam concerning racial disparities, many state legislatures reconsidered the use of a licensure exam to reflect competency. Illinois SB1632 removed exam requirements and resulted in approximately 2,500 additional social workers receiving licensure within six months compared to the prior year (National Association of Social Workers, 2022). Washington, D.C., has proposed the Social Work License Modernization Amendment Act of 2023, which would eliminate the use of the ASWB exam and convene a task force to create new recommendations for competency evaluations (2023). Utah H.B. 250 removed the examination requirement for licensure (2023). Maryland Senate Bill 145 passed in May of 2023 to provide temporary examination waivers for social work licensure until a new process for determining competency can be established.

States should continue removing examination requirements for determining social work competency. This step requires reviewing current licensure regulations and adopting appropriate edits to remove examination requirements. This language may vary from state to state.

### ***Adoption of Licensed Social Work Associate Requirements***

Massachusetts is the only state that allows access to licensure with four years of human services experience, documented supervision by a licensed social worker, and a high school diploma. Other states can replicate this model to expand access to social work professionalization beyond those who can access four-, five-, or six-year degree programs or have accessibility challenges within the current education model. The model language to create this pathway can be found in Massachusetts 258 CMR 9.06: Licensure Requirements for a Licensed Social Work Associate (2017). This policy requires 1,000 hours of education in social work theory and methods in courses or programs provided by field supervision, approved by the Massachusetts Licensure Board. Current programs in this context can mean working under the supervision of a licensed social worker providing community-based services for four years. This pathway expands opportunities

for individuals living in poverty, parents or caretakers, and people with disabilities that prohibit them from accessing higher education. If implemented, this could create a workforce more reflective of the populations served as access expands.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In implementing these two policy recommendations, state licensure boards can combat years of systemic racism and inaccessibility within the social work profession. To ensure the workforce reflects those experiencing homelessness, BIPOC social workers and social workers who speak English as a second language must have increased access to licensure. Licensure opens doors to supervisory roles that continue to be held predominantly by White social workers with advanced degrees. It can also create a larger pool for hiring during a significant social worker shortage across the country. By removing the exam requirement that disproportionately fails BIPOC social workers and opening licensure to people without completed degree requirements, the social work profession can take a step closer to equity.

Homelessness services can increasingly bill Medicaid for casework and other benefits when the provider has a license in social work. If more individuals can access licensure through lived experience, work experience, and mentorship, services can access increased funding through Medicaid reimbursement. This increased funding can be directed towards caseworker salaries and providing additional resources to individuals experiencing homelessness. The need for increased wages within the homeless services workforce is clear, and accessible funding streams can start to close that gap.

Social work licensure as a means to professionalize has resulted in a predominantly White workforce with advanced degrees (Salsberg et al., 2020). It has diminished access to a helping professional career path for BIPOC and low-income communities. For this reason, social workers should dedicate resources to question the current education and regulatory systems and consider significant shifts in the field with justice

in mind. In the immediate future, the solutions outlined here can increase access to professional development,

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funding, and decision-making power for BIPOC providers and those with lived expertise to practice community care in homelessness services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Local leaders can begin addressing the historical inequality of the social work licensure process by first eliminating an exam requirement. The test outcomes disproportionately harm Black, Latino/Hispanic, and Indigenous social workers and the communities that greatly benefit from providers that share identity and culture. Elected officials can eliminate the exam requirement through the legislative process following models developed in Illinois SB1632. Local advocates can contact their legislators for the adoption of similar measures in their states. Social workers should connect directly with state licensure boards to request alternative licensing models that do not include exams.

State leaders should consider expanding access to licensure beyond those with a degree in social work. State licensure boards and elected officials can expand their licensure to include a high school diploma and relevant experience by recommending the adoption of language similar to Massachusetts 258 CMR 9.06: Licensure Requirements for a Licensed Social Work Associate (2017). It creates a new pathway to social

work that can ensure a diverse workforce reflective of the people served. Advocates and social workers can request these measures from state elected officials. In particular, homelessness service providers have a role in advocacy at the state level, as the potential for an increased licensed workforce pool will create more effective and responsive services.



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