

## Examining State Policy Responses to Racial Disparities in Social Work Licensure Exams

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**Abstract:** *This study explored how states responded to the release of the 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis, which revealed significant disparities in pass rates between Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) test takers and their White counterparts on the Association of Social Work Boards' social work licensure exams. Using the conceptual framework of policy advocacy developed by Gen and Conley Wright (2013) to assess the inputs, activities, and outcomes associated with these state-level initiatives, National Association of Social Workers' state Chapter Directors were interviewed to better understand how different states worked to rectify inequities in licensure outcomes. Findings showed the political landscape, resources and stakeholder investment were key to progress on expressed outcomes. While the policy advocacy framework helped to elucidate the different inputs and activities between states, it was not found to be predictive of the expected outcomes associated with those identified variables.*

**Keywords:** *ASWB, NASW, licensure, exams, racial disparity, policy, advocacy*

On August 5, 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released the *ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis*, which revealed significant disparities in pass rates between Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) test takers and their White counterparts on the ASWB social work licensure exams. The release of this data had been advocated for many years by a variety of stakeholders (Albright & Thyer, 2010; DeCarlo, 2022; Dettlaff, 2021; Garcia, 1990), but pressure for the data significantly increased after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 (Nienow et al., 2023). As states began to analyze and make sense of this data, subsequent discourse, policy and legislative actions emerged in response to the reported disparities.

Leveraging the conceptual framework of policy advocacy developed by Gen and Conley Wright (2013) to assess the inputs, activities, and outcomes associated with these state-level initiatives, the authors interviewed nearly half of all NASW Chapter Directors to understand how different states responded to the data and what initiatives they were undertaking. This research project sought to answer two key questions:

1. What are the specific state responses to the racial disparities within the pass rates of the ASWB licensure exams?
2. Does the policy advocacy framework developed by Gen and Conley Wright (2013) explain how the different inputs and activities between states lead to the expected outcomes?

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The conceptual framework guiding efforts to analyze the differing state responses was selected after careful examination of the literature on theoretical approaches to policy advocacy. This review revealed several key models such as the Social Action Model (Zeltman et al., 1973); the Movement Action Plan (Moyers, 1987); Multiple Streams Theory (Kingdon, 1984) and the policy advocacy framework (Gen & Conley Wright, 2013). Each of these models offered a different way of describing and analyzing the policy advocacy approaches happening among the states.

The Social Action Model (Zeltman et al., 1973), provides a strategic framework for addressing systemic inequities through four key approaches: educational, persuasive, facilitative, and power strategies. The model allows researchers to develop a broad overview of the political landscape but fails to allow for deeper investigation into specific issues.

Unfortunately, the model lacked actionable strategies; while it discusses advocacy efforts and challenges, it fails to provide concrete recommendations for overcoming barriers to reform. A model that includes specific, actionable steps would better inform stakeholders on how to effectively engage in advocacy and push for systemic change. Due to these limitations, the Social Action Model did not provide a full theory of change by which to trace action and inputs to outputs and outcomes.

Bill Moyer's (1987) Movement Action Plan (MAP) provided another perspective on how social movements evolve. Moyer (1987) outlined eight stages that successful movements typically pass through, starting with "normal times" (p. 9), where the public remains largely unaware of the issue, to the later stages where movements gain traction and eventually succeed. While this model has been applied to contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter, scholars have identified several limitations. Christiansen (2011) notes that social movements often do not follow linear progression models, as they may experience periods of emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline in varying orders depending on contextual factors. Cox (2018) emphasizes that social movement theories must account for diverse cultural and political contexts. These complexities present challenges when applying traditional social movement frameworks to social work licensure reform, where efforts must navigate varying licensure models, regulatory bodies, governmental makeup, and legislation across different states.

Kingdon's (1984) Multiple Streams Theory offers a way of considering the multiple factors influencing upon policy change. The streams include: the Problem Stream in which an individual condition becomes a social problem capturing the attention of policymakers and the public; the Policy Stream in which experts, stakeholders, and advocates develop suggested solutions to the problem; and finally, the Political Stream in which the political environment is responsive to the solutions developed in response to the problem. When the multiple streams come together, a "policy window" (p. 20) is said to have opened. While this model is useful for understanding key factors leading to policy change, it does not help to explain what actions are most useful to successfully achieving the intended advocacy goals. Cairney and Jones (2016) argue this framework lacks specificity regarding the mechanisms connecting the streams, making it difficult to predict when and how policy windows will open. Béland and Howlett (2016) critique its limited applicability beyond

agenda-setting, thus while it offered some analytic value to understanding policy windows within states, it did not offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the work and outcomes of policy advocacy.

The conceptual framework by Gen and Conley Wright (2013) was ultimately chosen as the one that best aligned with the research questions central to this study. This framework provides a logic model illustrating links within the policy advocacy process. The model helps to explain the inputs, activities, and outcomes associated with specific policy advocacy efforts, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how various advocacy components are interconnected. Key components of the model include inputs, which encompass the necessary resources, relationships, and support for initiating advocacy efforts, such as personnel, funding, and organizational capacity. Activities comprise concrete actions to promote policy changes, including coalition building, public engagement, information campaigns, and lobbying decision-makers. The resulting outcomes are shifts in public opinion, influencing decision-makers, and policy changes that benefit target populations.

This framework highlights theoretical linkages, suggesting how inputs foster activities leading to distinct outcomes. It outlines two primary advocacy goals: first, promoting public-centered policymaking by engaging and mobilizing the public to build political influence; and second, targeting population changes through strategies such as public pressure, direct influence on decision-makers, direct reform initiatives, and implementation changes that necessitate knowledge of bureaucratic processes.

This conceptual framework helps to outline the landscape for policy reforms related to pass rate disparities in each state. The logic model provides a clear framework for examining the different components of policy advocacy. By categorizing inputs, activities, and outcomes, the authors systematically assessed how state-level initiatives are designed to address the disparities revealed by the ASWB report. Additionally, this logic model allows researchers to identify what resources and relationships (inputs) states are leveraging to tackle inequities in licensure.

## **Method**

This exploratory study used interviews to answer the research questions posed. This study was reviewed and considered exempt by the first author's Institutional Review Board.

### **Participant Selection**

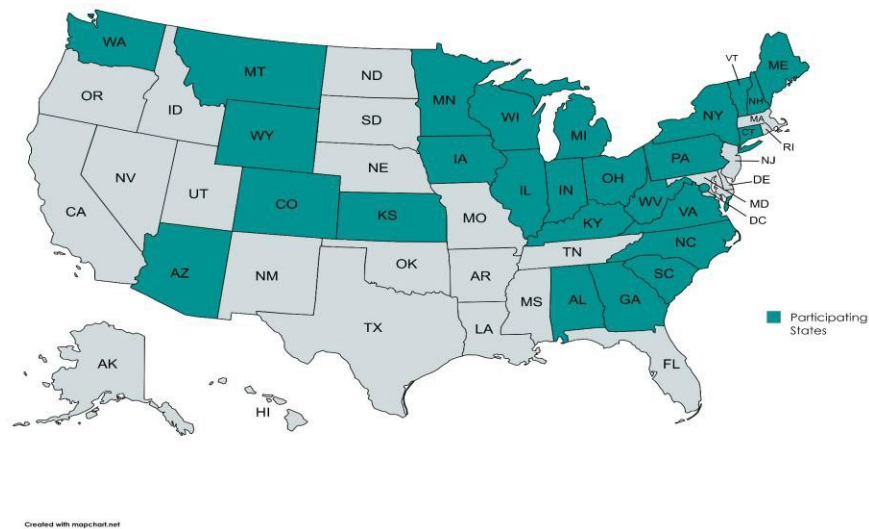
The purposive sample was Chapter Directors of NASW, as they are leaders of the largest social work advocacy organization within each state and most likely to understand the political landscape, strategies and activities happening in response to disparities within the exams. While a great deal of the information provided during the interviews with these Chapter Directors could have been found through review of websites, reports or other informational sources, interviewing NASW Chapter Directors was chosen because of the efficiency of gathering the desired information along with a more emic perspective of the meaning behind particular decisions or activities.

The first two authors began the recruitment process by presenting on a NASW monthly Chapter/National Government Relations Call. The target was to collect data from all NASW Chapter Directors to learn about the differences in approaches between the jurisdictions.

Approximately 15 people attended the meeting in which the authors outlined the study. The authors then compiled and emailed all NASW Chapter Directors (N=44) explaining the study. Some NASW Chapter Directors covered more than one state chapter, so while 52 states (including D.C. and the Virgin Islands) were represented, only 44 directors were contacted.

Ultimately, study data came from a total of 24 separate respondents (including 2 non-NASW Chapter Directors who served as proxy respondents as their respective Chapter Directors were not available) covering 26 states and jurisdictions. Eight states were located on the East coast (ME, NH, NY, CT, PA, WV, VA), nine states in the Midwest (MN, WI, IA, IL, IN, MI, OH, KY), four in the Southeast (NC, SC, GA, AL) and five from the West (WA, MT, WY, CO, AZ) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *States Participating in Study*



## Data Collection Methods

NASW Chapter Directors were asked to participate in a 45-minute semi-structured interview with one of the study authors. Three NASW Chapter Directors were not able to meet with study authors, so they typed and submitted their responses. The interview schedule was developed using the Gen and Conley Wright (2013) framework. Participants were asked about their activities as they related to the exam disparity data, the perceived inputs available for such activities and what they saw as their short, medium and long-term goals. Qualitative data were collected over a three-month period (March to June 2024) with each author conducting virtual interviews based upon availability.

Interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes, with an average of 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed using Zoom software. Prior to data collection, participants were sent interview consent forms explaining the study. At the start of interviews, researchers confirmed receipt of the consent forms, gained verbal consent, and asked respondents to explain their understanding of the study's purpose. Online respondents electronically affirmed their understanding and participation in the study.

### **Data Analyses**

Thematic analysis of the data proceeded in phases, with all authors coding narrative responses inductively as follows: after familiarizing themselves with the data (phase 1), the transcripts were divided with each transcript assigned to two authors who generated initial codes and grouped them according to the key domains in the Gen and Conley Wright (2013) framework independently (phase 2). These codes were then collated into potential themes, first independently by each author, then in a conversation with the other assigned author to reconcile differences (phase 3). In phase 4, the themes and subthemes were differentiated by reviewing the codes and accounting for the entire analytic dataset (equivalent to saturation in Braun and Clarke's [2006] thematic analysis). Themes and subthemes were then named (phase 5) in several meetings with all authors participating until agreement was reached about the final findings.

### **Results**

Gen and Conley Wright's (2013) framework provides a useful way to analyze the NASW Chapter responses to the racial disparities in pass rates. Additionally, the data helped to identify ways in which the framework can be modified to be more useful to social workers and others who are interested in policy advocacy. An examination of proximal and distal outcomes yielded results with broader implications for policy advocacy. An examination of the distal outcome of policy adoption and each of the proximal outcomes demonstrates commonalities and distinctions in approaches. A summary of the results is seen in Table 1 and described in the results section using Gen and Conley Wright's (2013) framework.

#### **Distal Outcomes/Impacts**

##### ***Policy Adoption***

In each state where policy reform was achieved, advocacy by NASW chapters played a critical role. There were no policy reforms or adoptions identified on the issue of social work licensure not directly related to activities organized and conducted by NASW. There was a wide variety of policy adoptions with some states imposing temporary moratoriums on testing, others eliminating testing at the non-clinical categories and others creating alternate pathways in lieu of testing.

Table 1. *Summary of National Change Effort to Address Racial Disparities in Pass Rates on ASWB Social Work Licensing Exams using Gen and Conley Wright's (2013) Framework*

		Summary	Key Considerations/Activities
<b>Distal Outcomes/Impacts</b>	<b>Policy Adoption</b>	NASW chapter advocacy was critical with tailored approaches based on state's political environment.	Moratoriums on testing; eliminating testing; alternative pathways
<b>Proximal Outcomes</b>	<b>Democratic Environment</b>	Efforts focused on giving underrepresented voices (i.e., those who had not passed the licensure exams) representation in the change process.  Generational differences between social workers & political barriers were present.	Open discussions & listening sessions as empowerment methods
	<b>Changes in Public Views</b>	Many were unaware of problems, so the education of key stakeholders & social workers generally was a key focus.  Concerns focused on decreased credibility & further deregulation.	Focus on workforce shortages & a perceived lack of transparency in ASWB
	<b>Changes in Decision-Makers' Views</b>	Key decision-makers varied between states with targets in both the executive & legislative branches. Political capital & funds for lobbyists were used with less resistance in states that already had social workers or other mental health workers practicing without testing.	NASW Chapter Directors' roles varied between leaders & facilitators with varying activities based on role definition
<b>Activities</b>	<b>Engaging &amp; Mobilizing Public</b>	Collaborative approach was employed, with efforts to engage allied professional groups who also wanted to make changes to their licensure laws.	Town halls; listening sessions; surveys; providing support to social workers pursuing licensure
	<b>Coalition Building</b>	Strong past relationships with other social work relationships made coalition building easy & efficient.	Common focus equity & inclusion resulted in support for marginalized groups impacted by disparate pass rates
	<b>Engaging Decision-Makers</b>	Competing priorities, such as the Social Work Compact, needed to be considered with regard to "asks." Political tensions about the need for reform due to racial justice were considered in the engagement strategy.	Lobbyists; simplifying complex message
	<b>Information Campaigning</b>	Both ASWB & scholarly data on racial disparities in testing were used in carefully crafted messages.	Briefings; presentations; social media campaigns
	<b>Reform Efforts</b>	Test elimination at the master's category was seen as a compromise & a pseudo pilot for further elimination at the Clinical category in the future.	Further reforms focus on ASWB policies such as retesting fees & other administrative issues
	<b>Defensive Activities</b>	ASWB's financial resources posed challenges as funds were used to hire lobbyists with NASW state chapter budgets having fewer financial resources.  NASW Chapter Director relationships with state policymakers were important assets.	Limited communication with ASWB precluded compromise discussions
<b>Inputs</b>	<b>Sense of Agency</b>	Consensus about reasons for the racial disparities in testing guided paths forward with NASW Chapter Director tenure & skill in organizing critical to making changes.	Lack of consensus about the root cause of the problem resulted in an inability to effect change
	<b>People &amp; Relationships</b>	Internal & external relationships were critical to policy reform.	Relevant for all chapters
	<b>Specialized Knowledge &amp; Skills</b>	Limited knowledge by NASW Chapter Directors about exam psychometrics posed challenges.	Need for workforce & regulatory data coupled with concern about efficacy of accredited social work educational programs
	<b>Material Resources</b>	Lack of financial resources for lobbying was seen as an impediment with other legislative priorities (Social Work Compact) being a priority.	Financial strain on repeat test takers was major driver for change

NASW Chapter Directors mentioned that the path to policy adoption could not fit a “one size fits all” approach. Some bills came close to passing, but ultimately failed for a variety of reasons, many of which did not directly relate to the substantive issue. In these states, there was optimism for future success, with plans to reintroduce failed legislation. Advocates were determined to push forward in future sessions. In these states, there were increased efforts for policy alternatives such as offering provisional licensure and financial support for test preparation. One chapter tried to work on the periphery by making it easier to apply for a license, helping test takers access non-standard testing arrangements (i.e., accommodations) and issuing temporary permits allowing for one year to pass the exam while still practicing.

States said that they will continue to monitor what other states are doing and share information/work with stakeholders. A lot of hope was expressed that things will change due to ASWB efforts or NASW stepping up to provide additional resources. Upcoming elections were anticipated to change the political climate and influence next steps with policy actions.

## **Proximal Outcomes**

### ***Democratic Environment***

The original Gen and Conley Wright (2013) model viewed a democratic environment as a proximal outcome aimed at public-centered policymaking. All interviews with NASW Chapter Directors indicated the desire to ensure underrepresented voices (i.e., those who had not passed the licensure exams) were represented throughout the process. While a more inclusive policymaking process can be an outcome, ensuring “safe spaces” for those impacted to share their stories was also seen by NASW Chapters as critical to all activities and a driving force. All NASW Chapter Directors felt that their mission was to ensure there was greater accessibility into the profession.

Critical to the proximal outcome of creating a democratic environment is the activity of engaging and mobilizing the public. Interviews indicated a generational divide in what mobilized social workers on the issue of eliminating the licensure exam. Older social workers and those providing clinical supervision tended to oppose eliminating the exam, while younger professionals supported elimination or alternatives to the standardized test. For example, in one state, the NASW Chapter Director relayed:

*Our board was divided on what to do about the exam. We had members that truly believed in the exam. And we had some board members that think they should be eliminated. Some of our older, long-time licensed clinical social workers were very strongly opposed to elimination of an examination. We had agencies that want to get rid of the exam. These were people, agencies that were having trouble hiring...*

According to the model, engaging and mobilizing members through open discussions and listening sessions was seen as the key activity. NASW Chapter Directors in some states mentioned low participation and lack of consensus among stakeholders as a challenge, reflecting the difficulty in mobilizing civic engagement. For example, in describing why a

particular initiative to eliminate the exam was unsuccessful, one NASW Chapter Director said, “It is harder to get to consensus as there are fewer people and cannot (sic) have different coalitions so need everyone to agree.” Smaller chapters faced resource limitations and imbalanced partnerships which served as barriers to mobilizing membership and allied stakeholders.

Leadership was focused on addressing racial disparities and promoting inclusion, but political and resource barriers existed. The political landscape, especially in conservative states, further complicated the passing of reforms, especially those perceived to be linked to racial justice. For example, the NASW Chapter Director in one such state said,

*...if we were to try to do exam removal, it's how would you talk about that in a way that doesn't have anything to do with racial disparities because that would just make them, like dig in their dirt even more because they're just like, we don't believe in racism, I guess.*

The choice of democratic environment as a proximal outcome seemed to stem from sentiments by NASW chapter leadership that it was not realistic to view policy adoption as a distal outcome given the political landscape in some states. In some states, testing is in statute so removing it would require “opening up” licensing laws which was perceived as much riskier than changing state statute. The NASW Chapter Director in another state explained, “Opening up the statute even to try to make positive change is absolutely terrifying...the entire profession can get deregulated if we open that statute up right now, and so we didn't try to run anything this legislative session.”

Thus, for some NASW chapters, promoting a democratic environment in which those impacted are centered in the discussions was the outcome. NASW Chapter Directors noted that this outcome is particularly aligned with social work values, which ensure that those who are marginalized are represented. Interestingly, several NASW Chapter Directors mentioned that groups that were impacted did not take a stand, or social workers of color were not necessarily advocating for change in the exam or licensure process.

### ***Changes in Public Views***

Gen and Conley Wright's (2013) model focused on changes in public views as directly related to the third proximal outcome of changing decision-makers' views, which ultimately leads to policy reform. Changing public views was the outcome of many NASW activities as NASW Chapter Directors indicated there appeared to be little knowledge of this issue outside of the profession. Additionally, NASW Chapter Directors in some states reported that social workers were also unaware even after the ASWB report about the disparities was released. For example, one NASW Chapter Director shared that results from a survey showed most members did not know about the reported racial disparities in the exam but still supported elimination of the exam for a variety of other reasons.

In some states, changing public views were targeted at external stakeholders while in other states the outcome was to gain consensus among social workers. Interviews revealed there was greater consensus about making changes in some states as opposed to others, with social workers divided about the need to reform. Central to these concerns about



eliminating the exam was a fear of reduced credibility for social workers as compared to other behavioral health providers, such as psychiatric nurses, or other allied professions which are often a part of composite boards which regulate social work.

Much of the messaging about the need for reforms was focused on the ongoing workforce crisis, particularly in rural areas, which underscored the need for more diverse professionals, adding urgency to licensure reform discussions. NASW Chapter Directors indicated that changing public views had to be approached carefully in states that were already fighting deregulation and there were questions about how policy adoption would impact on other legislative initiatives such as the Social Work Compact. For example, one NASW Chapter Director said, “you know we can't get the compact and get rid of...the exam and so we have to pick; the compact is the easier lift you know versus the fight that getting rid of an exam would take.”

Many NASW Chapter Directors also indicated ongoing concerns about ASWB's data and other materials, given a perceived lack of transparency, further fueling skepticism about the exam's fairness. Loss of trust in ASWB and the exam remains challenging for many Chapter Directors. Additionally, delays in license processing and workforce shortages created frustration which helped fuel reform efforts.

### ***Changes in Decision-Makers' Views***

A critical proximal outcome was garnering support among key decision-makers. Who these decision makers were varied between states. According to NASW Chapter Directors, in some states, the targets were rule-makers in the executive branch, while in most states, key decision-makers were found in the legislative branch. Interestingly, the role of NASW Chapter Directors, themselves, seemed to vary across states. Some saw themselves as leaders in change- making while others deferred to their Boards and acted more as facilitators.

Policy advocacy focused on promoting democracy or policy adoption was almost always driven by an a priori assessment of whether decision-makers were likely to be influenced or swayed. For example, a NASW Chapter Director talked about the role their Board of Social Work has in influencing any legislative proposals,

*In order to even bring forth any of these changes, they're gonna have to accept them or say yes or no, because to be quite frank, they are the ones behind the scenes that go to the legislators. Say, this isn't gonna work for us, or this is gonna work. So they would have to be on board.*

States faced mixed reactions from legislators when it came to alternative pathways to licensure. Some showed support or neutrality while others dismissed it as politically unviable. Many of the activities engaged in by NASW Chapters were focused on education about social work and how it is regulated. Many NASW Chapter Directors mentioned needing to “pick their battles,” with states prioritizing the Social Work Compact over exam elimination or alternative pathways because this seemed more politically viable. Many NASW Chapter Directors indicated that influencing decision-makers was expensive (due to the need to hire lobbyists) and resulted in the use of political capital.

In virtually all states, the desired outcome was to create alternative pathways or eliminate examination for non-clinical licenses. Several NASW Chapter Directors mentioned that changing decision-makers' views about testing was easier in states that already had social workers practicing without testing due to exemptions or policies allowing those who were already in practice to continue to do so without testing when state licensing laws were passed. For example, one NASW Chapter Director explained,

*...So around one-third of our licensed social workers in our state didn't take the exam...So we're not getting as much pushback directly from our social workers as saying, yeah, well, I understand the necessity for this because I had to do it or that's just been the way it is. We hear a little bit of that, but we also have a lot of these experienced supervisors, agency directors, clinicians who don't have any larger amounts of ethical issues.*

Licensure by other mental health professionals without testing also helped to change the views of decision-makers. NASW Chapter Directors mentioned that, in some states, licensing boards (focused on enforcement rather than broader diversity issues) are another barrier to reform, especially when they have power or influence with state officials and legislators.

## **Activities**

### ***Engaging and Mobilizing Public***

Interviews revealed that advocacy activities used by NASW Chapter Directors were more collaborative approaches as opposed to rallies and protests. Letter writing, which is often used in mobilization, was not a main strategy, according to NASW Chapter Directors. Most of the work focused on convening. The majority of engaging and mobilizing the public related to addressing racial disparities in licensure exams was done through town halls, listening sessions, surveys (data collection), providing services (supervision, test prep, etc.) and public comment at social work board meetings.

Broad community engagement efforts included both social workers and allied professionals who were also trying to make changes to their licensure laws. Work with allied professionals was more geared to leveraging political capital than the need to change the views of these professionals. Concerns about licensure fairness and the qualifications of mental health professionals were the main themes to spark engagement. Despite efforts to engage and mobilize, a large majority of those attending events or completing surveys showed ambivalence or even opposition to eliminating the licensure exam.

### ***Coalition Building***

Coalition building was one of the primary activities of the NASW Chapters. NASW Chapter Directors relied on the assistance of other social work entities, such as the Society of Clinical Social Work, and the National Association of Deans and Directors, as well as allied individuals and disciplines, which were part of mental health coalitions. Coalition building was prominent, with partnerships formed across organizations with diverse

professional groups and stakeholders, such as tribal units, universities, unions, clinical societies and BIPOC social work associations. Equity and inclusion emerged as central themes, particularly through leadership by people of color and the support of marginalized communities like Black social workers. NASW Chapter Directors mentioned that many coalition partners emerged from existing relationships and affiliations which made organizing much easier and more efficient as parties had worked together in the past, for example, one NASW Chapter Director described how their past efforts led to success in passing significant licensure legislation,

*Now, Pre-ASWB data coming out....several others had brought to our attention that there were pretty significant disparities going on, and we heard lots of anecdotal evidence wanting to receive the data like, let's see the data. So once we knew that was like a push that people were trying, you know, trying to access this data. So our policy committee....and our Board discussed it, as did the coalition of [Name omitted for confidentiality] and [Name omitted for confidentiality] and [Name omitted for confidentiality]...and we worked together to write a couple of letters to ask for meetings with our Board of Social Work and do public comment at our Board of Social Work meetings and really try to shake it up...alongside many of the other efforts that were happening across the country...so that's how it's going through right now.*

### ***Engaging Decision-Makers***

Engaging decision-makers is an activity that directly relates to changes in public views and decision-makers' views, according to the Gen and Conley Wright (2013) model. This activity did not relate to the proximal outcome of creating a democratic environment according to these scholars. Several NASW Chapter Directors mentioned using lobbyists and having to pick their priorities. There was a strong emphasis on the need for clear and persistent communication with policymakers and legislators, as efforts to explain complex issues are often met with resistance or misunderstanding. Several mentioned the Social Work Compact as a significant competing priority, which impacted the scope of their change efforts, as engaging decision-makers was also impacted by the number of "asks." There was also a telehealth bill in at least one state that was seen as a priority competing with testing and other reforms aimed at disparities.

Several NASW Chapter Directors tried to put a bill forward or discussed the possibility with legislators "behind closed doors." Many were told not to pursue because of the political climate, or if they pursued, not to use a "racial justice" lens, focusing instead on workforce development or access issues (e.g., in rural areas). Several NASW Chapter Directors mentioned having their licensing board support was critical for moving legislation forward, but others stated that this entity had little to no influence with legislators.

### ***Information Campaigning***

Educating policymakers was a significant activity by NASW Chapters. A lot of effort was put into refining and framing messages. Briefings/presentations were used, while media advocacy was not mentioned. NASW Chapter Directors identified gathering feedback through town halls, surveys, and listening sessions. Communication through social media and creating educational materials was important. Most NASW Chapters used the ASWB data which included the report that highlighted the disparities and the pass rates by state/social work program. Several NASW Chapter Directors mentioned using scholarly research which criticized testing or the psychometric properties of the ASWB exams. However, NASW Chapter Directors also mentioned limited resources and funding, which prevented more elaborate or comprehensive information campaigning. One Chapter Director commented,

*...I think we just need to increase our staff capacity. We have three of us right now and we are so so busy with what we currently have going on. But um getting the funding for this other staff member would help that if there were any other ways to get staff capacity built in our chapter through other funding...I don't know how any chapter smaller than us would ever pull this off. It's an incredible amount of work.*

### ***Reform Efforts***

Many NASW chapter activities focused on framing the reform efforts and some approached test elimination at the master's category as a pseudo pilot, with such framing needed to garner support. Reform efforts focused on balancing desires for broad-scale changes by eliminating testing altogether with the need for compromise, as there was a lack of support and consensus for such a drastic approach. Eliminating the master's test was coined by one chapter as eliminating "entry-level" testing. Some NASW Chapter Directors also mentioned focusing on reforms related to retesting fees and other administrative issues, but these items were solely under the purview of ASWB, so they were not successful in making these changes.

### ***Defensive Activities***

The data highlights divisions between social workers with regard to the need for reforms. Many were greatly divided with few seeing both sides or the need for compromise. In some states, starting with racial bias was a non-starter because there was so much anti-DEI rhetoric happening in their state. Data were collected prior to a presidential election in which partisan politics centered on differing approaches to the appropriateness of policy reforms that are based on equity and broad-based inclusion.

Many NASW Chapter Directors mentioned a lack of incentive for institutional reform, suggesting inertia within decision-making bodies. They also brought up the amount of money ASWB raises through testing and the lobbying budget used to thwart policy advocacy in opposition to testing. States mentioned not getting enough financial or lobbying support resources for them to even engage in defensive (or offensive activity).

Mounting any kind of offensive activity would mean having to defend additional efforts to deregulate licensure and was not something any of the NASW Chapter Directors wanted or could afford to risk. According to the NASW Chapter Directors, communication with ASWB seemed to be limited. Focusing on changing the test seemed not to be a focus of reform. An interesting point was that ASWB's perceived lack of relationships with state regulators seemed to be a weakness in countering policy change. The state presence of the NASW Chapters made coalition building easier.

## **Inputs**

### ***Sense of Agency***

The tenure of the NASW Chapter Directors appeared to be important as it was indicative of professional relationships in the states and the degree to which NASW Chapter Directors felt empowered to make change. With testing disparities, there was some disagreement between and across states regarding the problem (i.e., preparation, language, skill set needed to test versus practice, etc.). The ability to gain consensus about the problem was deemed essential to defining a path forward. The efforts of the NASW Chapters were driven by the "outcry" of others – for example, if there was not a sentiment that there was a problem, little action occurred.

Most NASW Chapter Directors wanted to work on the issue of alternative pathways and mentioned adopting NASW's national stance on the issue, but did not seem to know what or how to move toward this kind of change, and what they should be advocating for specifically.

Interviews highlight significant frustration and a sense of being overwhelmed by the challenges faced by some NASW Chapters, particularly regarding heavy workloads and limited support. One NASW Chapter Director summarized this frustration by stating, "I'm a one-woman show, and there's not enough of me to go around." This frustration was exacerbated as NASW Chapter Directors mentioned that collectively they could influence the practices of ASWB. For example, one NASW Chapter Director stated, "If (state) stopped requiring the exam, this would bankrupt ASWB."

There is a clear recognition of the need for systemic change, particularly through advocacy and lobbying, but the resources are unavailable to effect policy change directly related to the level of activity and eventual outcome. Leadership and decision-making are further complicated by the difficulty in achieving consensus within the profession, as highlighted by quotes reflecting the challenges of navigating diverse opinions. Having a consensus and support of NASW Chapter Boards and politically savvy NASW Chapter Directors resulted in a strong sense of agency and more activity focused on the proximal outcomes.

### ***People and Relationships***

All states were scanning the political environment and aware of strategic partnerships. Staffing resources of the NASW chapters also appeared to be important. This input seems

to be particularly relevant for reform efforts and was noted by NASW Chapter Directors as key in social work policy practice, perhaps because there is less money for hired lobbyists or campaign materials. There was a concerted effort to ensure that NASW activities were consistent with those of others and relationships with others were mentioned in nearly every interview. Interviews highlighted the importance of internal relationships. Internal support within the organization was seen as essential for driving initiatives and sustaining momentum in advocacy efforts. Many NASW Chapter Directors mentioned efforts to include BIPOC professionals in decision-making processes but also acknowledged gaps in leadership representation, particularly in mentoring roles.

### ***Specialized Knowledge and Skills***

Many NASW Chapter Directors spent time trying to understand the ASWB report and communicate its results. Several said they were not an “expert” on the issue of exam psychometrics and did not know what the impact of alternative pathways would be. Two NASW Chapter Directors conducted workforce research which lent some legitimacy for exploring alternative pathways.

There was a call among NASW Chapter Directors for updated data and research, especially regarding ethical complaints, workforce studies, and demographic disparities in licensure outcomes, as data is critical for informing policy reforms. Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of current education systems and materials, with mentions of students not being adequately prepared for exams and issues with the structure and fairness of tests. There was also discussion of different programs having varying rates of passage and not understanding why these differences existed.

### ***Material Resources***

Financial resources came up repeatedly as a justification for the change efforts (cost of preparation, test, etc.). Chapters seemed to expend primarily energy and time on these efforts. There was a mention of ASWB (the perceived opposition) having more financial resources and being able to hire lobbyists. Many NASW Chapter Directors stated they could not afford to work on both alternative pathways and the Social Work Compact. Most chose the Social Work Compact because it was easier politically and would take up less of their financial resources.

NASW Chapter Directors also stated that taking on alternative pathway advocacy work would mean having to oppose ASWB, which is better funded. NASW Chapter Directors stated that if NASW-National wanted them to work on alternative pathways, then they would need to provide much more financial support. One NASW Chapter plans to use its fiscal reserves to hire a lobbyist next session to work on both the Social Work Compact and alternative pathways to licensure. This will be the first time that the chapter uses its reserves for such an expense.

Many NASW Chapter Directors mentioned the value of prior relationships as critical in changing the views of decision-makers. Also getting support from constituency groups was essential to impacting the views of decision-makers. Social resources appeared to be

more salient inputs than fiscal ones in this area of policy advocacy.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the study include potential selection bias as participants were not randomly selected and opted into participation in the study. Approximately half of the state chapters participated in the study, so it is difficult to know if the findings are transferable to other states. Finally, the study relied upon the perspectives and viewpoints of the NASW Chapter Directors. Their points of view were not triangulated and may not present a holistic picture of what or why particular inputs, activities, or political context are present.

### **Discussion**

State responses to ASWB exam disparities were classified into three major groups, those that made: (1) some or significant changes to licensure policies, (2) progress toward changes in licensure policies with no current outcomes, and (3) no changes regarding licensure policies.

#### **Some or Significant Changes**

Some states passed significant changes to licensure policies. These included removing the exam from licensing processes entirely, or making changes to provisional licensing, offering options to skip the exam in favor of additional supervision requirements. The political environment in states which made significant changes was perceived as generally favorable to social work licensure, and therefore unlikely to use the opportunity to destabilize or undermine licensing practice. State legislatures were often willing collaborators with advocates for change. This did not necessarily make change work a smooth process, as ASWB lobbyists, social work licensing boards, clinical social work organizations, and other mental health providers, defended the status quo.

Other states made smaller changes to licensure policies on a permanent and temporary basis. For example, one state temporarily suspended the exam as a requirement for licensing, to be reinstated in a few years, with hopes that ASWB would work to correct issues with the exam. NASW in these states did some significant work to promote changemaking. Most NASW Chapter Directors engaged in conversations with constituents, through public forums, one-on-one conversations, surveys, and social media. In states with multiple affinity groups and professional organizations, NASW Chapter Directors worked with these organizations to develop policy positions and sometimes coalitions for advocacy. NASW Chapter Directors used this information to determine policy positions and organize.

In some states, there was a consensus that the exam was problematic, and change needed to be made. Other states faced significant opposition from some parties, including social work licensing boards, and negotiation, advocacy, and lobbying work were necessary to move policy change forward. The number of social work professionals in a state was often a key determinant: states with more NASW members had more resources

and involved constituents.

### **Progress Toward Changes**

Many states in this category had not yet passed licensing changes but implemented other meaningful changes or were making progress toward licensing change. Many states in this category suggested they were waiting to see what other states would do – usually specific states – looking for models they felt would reflect their own political environment or be desirable in their states. Some of these states suggested the Social Work Compact was the highest priority for practitioners, and once this was passed, they would work on the exam disparities. Several states expressed a desire to keep the exam, but then pressure ASWB to make changes that would make the exam more inclusive.

### **No Changes**

States in this category were not engaged in efforts to make changes to licensing policy. There were three primary reasons that states were in this category. Some states did not have consensus regarding licensing change, with some factions in support of retaining status quo. For example, there were factions in some states that understood the exam as essential for maintaining professional standards of practice or perceptions of professional capabilities. Other states were working on the Social Work Compact in parallel with concerns about the exam. In these situations, some NASW chapters did not have the resources to advance policy about the exam simultaneously. Others did not want to distract from, or complicate, efforts to pass the Social Work Compact.

Many states could not begin efforts toward licensure policy change because the political environment was not conducive or even perceived as dangerous to licensure more broadly. This was most frequently the case in states where the legislature and executive branch were primarily led by Republicans. In many of these states, NASW Chapter Directors were concerned that bringing forward any changes to licensure might involve “gutting” the entirety of licensure or changing it in significantly detrimental ways. In these cases, NASW chapters conducted public forums or educational efforts with their constituents about the exam or worked with schools of social work to enhance exam preparation efforts.

### **Empirical Testing of the Policy Advocacy Framework**

Gen and Conley Wright (2013) synthesize broad and robust literature on policy advocacy, attempting to build a conceptual framework and theory of change for the ways inputs, widely conceived, support advocacy activities, and result in short- and long-term outcomes. Gen and Conley Wright describe two broad goals and five strategies, tracing specific connections between particular inputs, activities, and desired outcomes. This study empirically utilized their framework and theorized linkages, asking whether there was evidence to support connections between inputs and activities, or between activities and outcomes. As they note,



These five strategies resulted from our linking of the composite logic model to relevant academic literature in policy studies, and they establish testable hypotheses for future empirical research. Such research would likely observe policy advocacy organizations and their actions, test for the practice of these strategies, and also look for other strategies that are not captured in this study. (Gen & Conley Wright, 2013, p. 186)

Data from this study highlights significant themes related to legislative advocacy, organizational challenges, and policy evaluation mechanisms, which support, extend, and complicate elements of their policy framework. As a nationwide sample of diverse, state-level policy advocacy work, the data in this study provided a good test of this framework.

### **Goal 1: Public-Centered Policymaking**

The first broad goal Gen and Conley Wright (2013) articulate is public-centered policymaking. This goal does not aim for specific policy outcomes but is “meant to build the political influence of a group or the public in the policymaking process, thereby resulting in public policies that better represent their interests” (Gen & Conley Wright, 2013, p. 182). The desired impact is a more democratic environment, in which target and future public policies better represent the interests of those they impact.

Goal 1 inputs were: sense of agency, people and relationships, and specialized knowledge, leading toward engaging and mobilizing the public (in this case, mostly social workers). All inputs were observed to be present, though to varying degrees. In states where opportunities to make change were foreclosed by the political environment, NASW Chapter Directors and social workers had a much lower sense of agency. NASW Chapter Directors are embedded in relationships with members and the broader social work public through direct and indirect means (for example, through relationships with schools of social work, they are connected to students).

Engaging and mobilizing the public was a response in almost every state. Efforts were made to invite a general audience of social workers through social media, public forums, and surveys. More specific efforts included NASW Chapter Directors meeting with advocacy and affinity groups, school directors and faculty, and social work licensing boards. NASW chapters used workshops, seminars, social media, and publications to educate the social work public.

It is less clear whether the work of engaging and mobilizing the public leads to a more democratic policy environment. In part, this is due to a lack of evidence. Many states were in the process of working toward reforms but foresaw a lengthy process toward any legislative change. Even in states that passed reforms, it is difficult to measure the impact of these reforms on the democratic environment around policy in social work, partly due to lack of evidence, as many of these projects were in progress currently, and did not yet lead to a sense that there were new outcomes about democratic environment. The authors suspect that democratic environment could be empirically tested by comparing participation with other similar kinds of legislation (even with efforts for the Social Work Compact, for example). One could also test to see if more inclusive policy practice will be

done in the future because of this work. However, this would also be difficult to study, as different issues result in different involvement and interest from various coalitions.

## **Goal 2: Changes for Target Populations and Systems that Serve Them**

The second broad goal is changes for target populations and the systems that serve them. Gen and Conley Wright (2013) list four strategies used here: (1) public pressure, (2) decision-makers, (3) direct reform, and (4) implementation change. The overall inputs used toward Goal 2 across all four strategies were examined, as well as their connection to the activities and outcomes for each strategy.

All inputs recognized by the Gen and Conley Wright (2013) model were present in states that made progress toward change. For example, many NASW Chapter Directors approached the change effort with a “sense of agency,” meaning that their activities and outcomes were shaped by their perceived political power, given the other driving and restraining forces. People and relationships were critical, as the NASW Chapter Directors who had been in their positions for longer periods and had existing coalition partners mentioned the value of using these assets. Contrarily, the ones who were not were at a disadvantage. Media, public relations, and finances (“material resources”) did not appear to be significant inputs in most cases. Most chapters suggested they did not have many resources or even the “people power” to organize significant efforts. Strategy and research were important ways to counteract a lack of material resources. Several chapters mentioned doing a survey or collecting data, as well as using the ASWB report and research, to fuel policy reforms. Knowing the political landscape and having specialized skills, such as understanding legislative processes, were important. Several NASW Chapter Directors mentioned being lobbyists or having relationships with legislators who were sensitive to the issue as they themselves were social workers or people of color.

Participants in the study readily acknowledged that their responses to exam disparities were highly driven by what was politically and otherwise feasible within their states. While the framework might suggest this is a part of the input *sense of agency*, the political environment or context appears to be an essential element of sense of agency and may be worth considering as its own category of input.

The first strategy, public pressure, involves activities that change public views in ways that lead to influencing decision-maker views (strategy 2). This strategy was key in all states that made meaningful progress toward policy change. Decision-makers, namely legislators and governors, were not otherwise invested in making changes to licensing laws, until the proposed policy reforms were brought forward by constituents or lobbyists. In most states, NASW Chapter Directors and allies participated in activities of engaging and mobilizing publics, coalition building, information campaigns, and attracting smaller decision-makers (such as licensing boards and schools of social work) to develop a shared policy agenda, promote a new licensing policy that changed exam requirements, and then influence lawmakers. NASW Chapter Directors also engaged directly with decision-makers to influence their views. Some NASW Chapter Directors had relationships with numerous legislators, some hired lobbyists, and some combined both tactics. There are legislative committees that maintain relationships with NASW Chapter Directors, in which

decision-makers were partly influenced without significantly engaging public views. In this study, there was difficulty drawing a strong distinction between the final impacts of efforts to change public views and decision-maker views.

Strategies 3 (direct reform) and 4 (implementation change) were not as readily observed. Among participants, none had yet engaged in attempts at policy reform through litigation, nor through attempts to alter the implementation of existing policies. There was no evidence of any efforts to approach policy advocacy through these methods. There were several states hoping that ASWB would make substantive changes to the exam that would result in reduced disparities, which would count as an implementation change (strategy 4); however, none were involved in actively pressuring ASWB in this direction.

### **Implications**

Several implications can be drawn from this study. First, NASW has a structure which is centralized for some functions but decentralized for others. Despite the National office indicating the need for exam elimination, there is no way to realize these efforts without strong legislative presence in each state. Many chapter staff are also part-time and have competing priorities so NASW-National would need to examine its staffing structure in light of the importance of “people and relationships” as inputs for policy change if a similar call to action by the national office is made in the future. In instances in which the same NASW Chapter Director was overseeing more than one state, the strategy and outcomes were usually consistent.

NASW has supported a more unified approach to licensure to adopt legislation related to the Social Work Compact. However, the patchwork approach to state responses to ASWB disparities appears counter to this approach. Allowing each state to determine its own policy priorities resulted in greater variation between NASW Chapter actions. NASW did not publicly put pressure on ASWB to immediately make changes to the test, including smaller reforms, such as retesting fees, which may have changed the trajectory in some states. NASW did issue a public statement for such changes nearly two years after the release of the ASWB exam disparity data.

Several chapters mentioned BIPOC social workers did not take a stand on or advocate for change when it came to proposals for eliminating or developing alternatives to the exam. The explanation most often shared was that focusing on the racial disparities made these BIPOC social workers feel like they were “less qualified” and/or damaged their credibility. The profession needs to take these concerns seriously and potentially focus less on the racial disparities and more on the validity of a standardized exam to measure “minimal competence” and protect the public.

### **Policy Advocacy Framework**

More work may be needed to use the Gen and Conley Wright (2013) framework reliably in policy analysis. While this study offers an empirical grounding of Gen and Conley Wright’s model, there were some limitations, including that some parts of the framework were much less available than others. While this study extended the framework

in a few small ways, in general, the framework could be reliably used with data collected and proved a useful way to understand the complexity and intricacies of policy practice across a comparative sample.

The data also indicates a pressing need for mechanisms to continuously evaluate policy impacts and document interactions with policymakers, revealing difficulties in tracking engagement and outcomes. The organizational landscape appears unstable, with staff movements potentially affecting policy initiatives and creating uncertainty about responses from state agencies. This case study also highlights the complexity of policy practice and questions the linear nature of the model used. Changes in public or decision-maker views, both defined as outputs, can serve as inputs for eventual policy adoption or implementation change.

There was no indication that the outcomes were decided by the input or activities; meaning, the environment in which these inputs and activities occurred needs further explanation. Just as social workers use a person-in-environment perspective – there is a need to consider the larger cultural and political systems at play. Perhaps using a genogram approach to policy analysis may be more consistent with social work theory as the profession draws importance on the larger systems in which processes occur. For example, states may be operating with one political party in power or in an environment which is legislatively contentious given different parties in power in different bodies. States also have different legislative sessions which may delay or expedite policy reforms.

Many NASW Chapter Directors also spoke about what other states were doing, using their efforts as models and additional pressures for change. For example, the NASW Chapter Director of a small northeastern state indicated that if a larger state were to eliminate the exam it may result in a significant financial impact for ASWB given the number of test-takers, whereas in smaller states it would have little impact, given the limited number of potential licensees.

Ultimately, the profession of social work remains in flux and without a singular organizing model to move it forward. NASW, as the profession's national practice organization, could take steps to help coordinate and support the efforts for a more uniform response to the disparity in licensure data, as they did with the Social Work Compact. The model by Gen and Conley Wright (2013) could be used to inform the specific inputs and activities necessary to achieve this outcome. However, the absence of consensus among stakeholders about the value of testing as part of licensing, the differing state political environments and lack of any agreed upon solution will continue to hinder progress toward the desired goal.



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