



February 4, 2025

The Honorable Representative Joseph J. Solomon, Jr.  
Chair of the House Corporations Committee  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: Support for House Bill 5158 - Social Workers' Licensing Exam**

Dear Chairman Solomon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to express the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island's (MHARI) support for House Bill 5158, related to social workers' licensing exam. We thank Representative Shallcross Smith for introducing this bill.

This legislation repeals the examination requirement in order to qualify for a clinical social worker's license. The exam is administered following the completion of 60 credit hours of coursework, at least 3,000 hours of supervised professional experience, and the submission of two letters of recommendation. Many professors in schools of social work will tell you that a standardized test does not measure readiness to practice in the field.

MHARI supports this legislation for two reasons. First, Rhode Island has a shortage of mental and behavioral health professionals. About one in four children ages 3 to 17 experienced mental, emotional or behavioral health problems in 2022, but nearly 60% had trouble accessing care, according to the 2024 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the [state's own Community Needs Assessment](#), which was published in 2024, echoed this finding. The report shows that more than half of survey respondents expressed concern over a variety of access areas, ranging from outpatient mental health and substance use disorder treatment to crisis stabilization services.<sup>2</sup> Eliminating the exam – which costs between \$230 and \$260 not including preparation materials – would allow newly minted social workers to enter the field faster and expand access to care.

Secondly, the elimination of the exam helps to remedy an inequity: this standardized test is notoriously racially and culturally biased. Social work schools across the country have raised the alarm on the disproportionate number of Students of Color and speakers of English as a second language who fail the exam at a rate far higher than their white counterparts, even though all students are completing the same social work coursework in the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/factbook2024\\_final-2.pdf](https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/factbook2024_final-2.pdf)

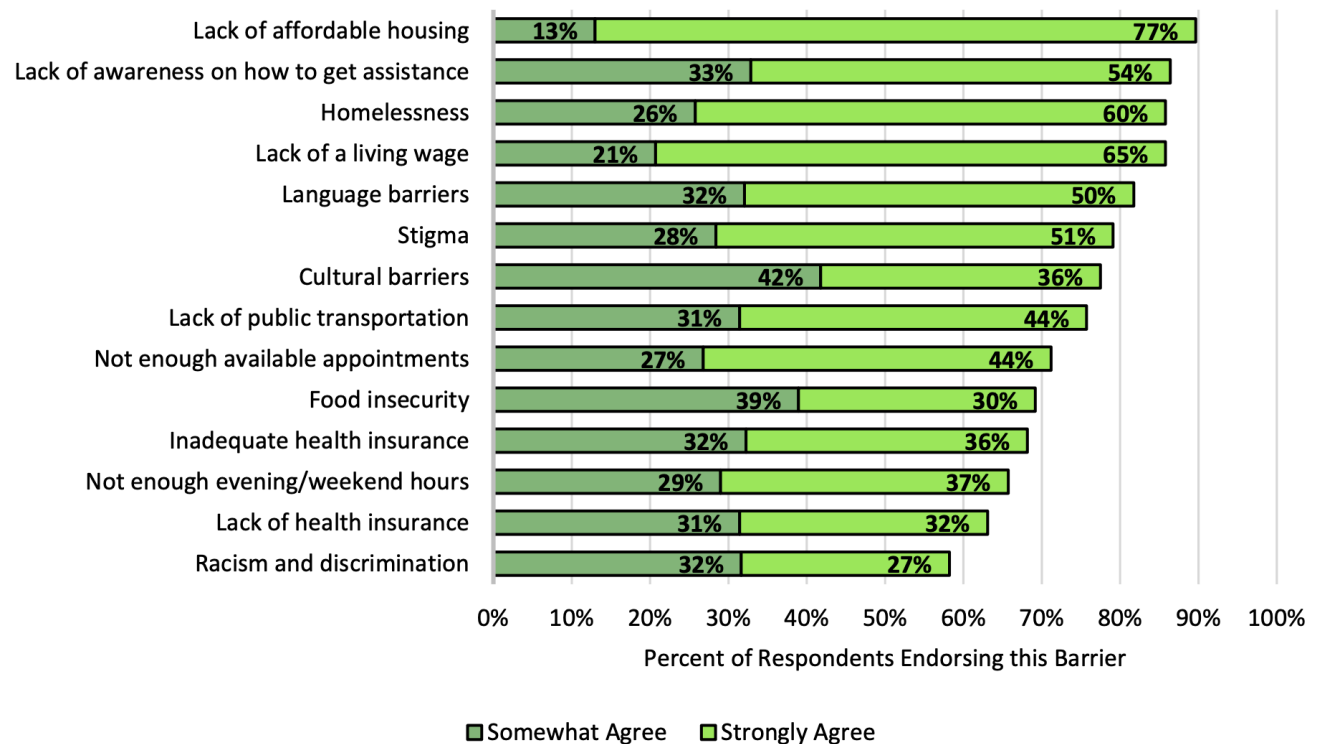
<sup>2</sup> [https://eohhs.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur226/files/2024-05/Statewide%20Community%20Needs%20Assessment\\_03.22.2024.pdf](https://eohhs.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur226/files/2024-05/Statewide%20Community%20Needs%20Assessment_03.22.2024.pdf)

same classes. Illinois passed a law to eliminate the exam as a requirement for licensure.<sup>3</sup> New York has started to collect state level data on the demographics of who is passing and failing this exam.

You might wonder how an exam could be racially or culturally biased. Rhode Island College provided to me an example of a biased question on the exam, and it's as follows: If you (a social worker) are visiting your client in the client's home, and the client offers you a drink, do you take it? According to the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the correct answer is 'no.' However, if you are an Asian American social worker, the correct answer is 'yes' because you would not want to insult your host and damage rapport. You can see how Asian American students are at a disadvantage because of this exam.

Lastly, as noted in MHARI's [2021 report](#), "[Network Adequacy: A Survey of Rhode Island's Behavioral Health Provider Network](#)," Rhode Island has a shortage of providers from diverse backgrounds, and this in turn makes it difficult for People of Color and those who speak English as a second language to find providers who share their culture and language.<sup>4</sup> Again, survey respondents in the state's own Community Needs Assessment identified cultural and linguistic differences as significant barriers to care. Figure 10 (below) taken from the Assessment demonstrates this.<sup>5</sup> Eliminating the biased standardized test would enable providers from diverse backgrounds to more easily enter the field.

*Figure 10. Deep-Rooted Barriers to Required Support and Services*



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.naswil.org/licensure-steps>

<sup>4</sup> <https://mhari.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MHARI-Survey-Reportv31.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://eohhs.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur226/files/2024-05/Statewide%20Community%20Needs%20Assessment\\_03.22.2024.pdf](https://eohhs.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur226/files/2024-05/Statewide%20Community%20Needs%20Assessment_03.22.2024.pdf)

In short, this bill helps Rhode Island address its shortage of behavioral health professionals. Every Rhode Islander deserves access to life-saving treatment.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on this legislation. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

*Laurie-Marie Pisciotta*

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Executive Director

[laurie.pisciotta@mhari.org](mailto:laurie.pisciotta@mhari.org)

(401) 215-4471 cell