

## Memo of Concern

*Clinical Social Work Licensing*  
November 2024

Since the 2020 pandemic, there has been an increased need for mental health services with 25% of US citizens having a mental health disorder (KFF, 2022). Clinical Social Workers (legally designated as LCSWs, LICSWs and other titles) are the largest group of clinicians providing mental health services in the United States, numbering over 365,000 qualified professionals (CSWA, 2024). Since 2004, every state and jurisdiction has had licensure laws and regulations governing psychotherapy services given by clinical social workers, including *scopes of practice that allow LCSWs to assess, diagnose and treat mental illness independently*, thus protecting vulnerable citizens seeking mental health services. The requirements developed by each state reflect a range of standards. To assure an adequate level of competency, however, each state requires an LCSW candidate to have a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree; a minimum of 2000 hours/two years of post-Masters supervised experience providing psychotherapy services; and the successful passing of a national clinical examination.

The last requirement – passing a national examination – has been embattled for the past two years. This conflict originated from a 2022 report issued by the organization that oversees the development and administration of the national examination, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). This report showed that the pass rate for Black clinical social workers was 40% lower than for white clinical social workers; older MSWs and MSWs who use English as a second language also had lower pass rates. Concern about these disparities led to different explanations about what could be done to make pass rates more equivalent.

*Concerns:* This Memo clarifies our three major concerns for the future of clinical social work. First, we recognize the importance of removing barriers to maintaining and expanding the LCSW workforce, to meet the need to increase access to mental health services. Second, a more reasoned and systematic review of the national examination for clinical licensing is in order to eliminate any racial, ethnic or age-related bias. This exam is an essential metric by which core competencies and acquired clinical skills can be measured and assured; finding a way to improve it is clearly preferable to eliminating the exam. Third, providing preparatory courses at low or no cost, to prepare MSWs for the clinical examination would be helpful to those who find it difficult to pass the exam.

To clarify the skills required to be an independent LCSW, we have included the ASWB Model scope of practice, the basis for the national clinical examination:

*Practice of Clinical Social Work:* A specialty within the practice of Master's Social Work requiring the application of social work theory, knowledge, methods, ethics, and the professional use of self to restore or enhance social, psychosocial, or bio-psychosocial functioning of individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations and communities. The practice of Clinical Social Work requires the application of specialized clinical knowledge and advanced clinical skills in the areas of assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, conditions and addictions. Treatment methods include the provision of individual, marital, couple, family and group counseling and psychotherapy. The practice of Clinical Social Work may include private practice and the provision of clinical supervision. (ASWB, 2010)

Several states have incorporated the ASWB standard for their clinical social work scope of practice licenses including Minnesota, New York, and Washington State.

LCSWs provide psychotherapy services which are also provided by five other mental health disciplines. To eliminate the national examination would make clinical social workers an outlier among these other mental health professionals which include five professions – psychologists, psychiatrists, professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, advanced practice psychiatric nurses, and, in some states, psychoanalysts. *It could damage the credibility of LCSWs as practicing psychotherapists and threaten their ability to receive insurance reimbursement.*

For these reasons, the signatories to this document support retaining the national clinical examination as one of the

three primary requirements for becoming a licensed clinical social worker. There should be a careful reevaluation of the examination to determine what revisions might be helpful in removing disparities.

In summary, it is essential for LCSWs:

- *To have acquired an MSW (or PhD) from an accredited social work program.*
- *To complete a supervised post-MSW clinical experience of at least 2000 hours.*
- *To pass a national clinical examination.*

These criteria measure the core competencies and clinical skills of individual social workers seeking to become licensed clinical social workers. Providing reparative and preparatory tools to help MSWs who have difficulty passing the examination must be a priority, as is crafting an examination that is free from racial, ethnic or age-related disparities that contribute to the differences in pass rates.

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Georgia Society for Clinical Social Work Board of Directors

Minnesota Society for Clinical Social Work Board of Directors

Washington State Society for Clinical Social Work

#### References:

Kaiser Family Foundation, *Current Mental Health Needs*, 2022

Clinical Social Work Association, Number of LCSWs in the U.S., 2024