

## Charting a Joint Path Forward Towards Social Work Licensing and Workforce Development

(ASWB approved version)

There is a critical opportunity for major social work organizations to find common ground and act collectively to reduce racial inequality outcomes within our profession and to address the deepening shortage of social workers across the country.

Social work licensing in the United States is at the crossroads. In August 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released cumulative trend data on pass rates for all test takers of the bachelors, masters, and clinical exams from 2011 to 2021. This data showed that social work graduates from minoritized and diverse backgrounds — African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, persons fifty years old and older, and individuals whose primary language is not English — are passing the exams (Bachelor's Level and Master's Level) at significantly lower rates than White test takers. The reasons for such disparities are complex and span across several system levels, and these disparities have deepened the severe shortage of licensed social workers.

Consequently, various social work entities have made many efforts to address the above crisis, with mixed results. The federal government and many states are calling on the profession to address workforce shortages in behavioral health and other areas and making available millions of dollars for workforce initiatives. Now is the time for us to act collectively in a unified manner that protects the overall interest and autonomy of our profession. Failure to do so might result in every state attempting to address this crisis individually; broader and more collective action toward our goals may be lost. For example, it will also derail efforts to achieve equitable access to participate in the portability of licensure across state lines.

To chart a collective path forward, leadership from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD), the NADD Licensure Taskforce, and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) came together during the 2023 CSWE APM in Atlanta to deliberate which resulted in three major agreements to frame our work.

First, we wish to restate our **unequivocal support for licensing** to maintain the high standards of practice that the profession of social work has fought hard to achieve. Regulatory licensing is not and should not be optional. To suggest otherwise does harm to our profession, erases hard-won gains, and diminishes the professional stature of social work.

Second, we **acknowledge the severity of the licensing crisis**, and we signal our commitment to work together to address it. All our organizations — representing educators, professionals, regulators, and social work advocates — have a shared responsibility in alleviating licensing disparities and addressing the social work labor shortage.

Third, we recognize that there could and should be a **variety of options** by which licensing can be achieved, in addition to a national exam, and we commit to work together with regulatory boards to identify and explore some of those options. These options should all demonstrate a diverse and equitable approach in standard and rigor that seeks to avoid creating a tiered system of licensure that can/may ultimately threaten our profession and continue to perpetuate inequitable outcomes.

We will reconvene to continue our collective efforts to develop a strategy for advancing our cause.

We stand undeterred by the challenges faced in the recognition that all of us must own the licensing crisis, and that we must work together to solve it!

Version dated.

**02.02.24**