



Oregon

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State Board of Licensed Social Workers

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Before the

Senate Interim Committee on Human Services

September 28, 2023

Capacity for Timely Licensure of Social Workers

Written Testimony Submitted by the
Oregon Board of Licensed Social Workers

Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice Chair Robinson, members of Committee,

I am Lou Savage, interim Executive Director for the Oregon Board of Licensed Social Workers. With me today is Kim Coleman, Licensing Manager for the agency. Thank you Chair Gelser Blouin for inviting us to the hearing today. We recognize that there is a tremendous unmet need for behavioral health services in Oregon and there is a huge shortage in the behavioral health workforce. We know that the Board of Licensed Social Workers needs to be part of the solution to this problem.

The Board of Licensed Social Workers, sometimes referred to as the BLSW is statutorily responsible to protect the citizens of Oregon through the regulation of social workers. This is accomplished by setting

policy, establishing standards of practice and ethical conduct, establishing standards for certification and licensure, including renewals, and monitoring continuing education requirements.

The Board is comprised of seven members, appointed by the Governor, and confirmed by the Senate. Three members must be licensed clinical social workers, one must hold one of the other three licenses, and the other three must be members of the public and not be licensed social workers.

The Board's licensure program covers two clinical licenses, Clinical Social Work Associate (CSWA) and Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). The CSWA is the first step to becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). Graduates with a master's degree in social work need 3500 hours of supervised clinical experience, 2000 hours of direct client hours, 100 hours of supervision (at least 50 in individual supervision) and have been supervised for no less than 24 months. LCSWs have specialized clinical knowledge and advanced clinical skills to the assessment, diagnosis, or treatment of mental, emotional or behavioral disorders or conditions, including but not limited to those identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

These licensees typically work one-on-one with individuals or families on everything from assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illness, emotional and other behavioral disturbances to access to housing, healthcare, resources, and social services. They can work in a variety of settings including private practice, hospitals, community mental health, hospices, agencies, and residential programs.

There are also two non-clinical license types, Registered Baccalaureate Social Worker (RBSW) and Licensed Master of Social Work (LMSW).

An RBSW and LMSW do generalist social work practice that includes assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation, case management, information and referral, non-clinical counseling, non-clinical supervision, consultation, education, research, advocacy, community organization, and the development, implementation and administration of policies, programs or activities. An LMSW has additional specialized knowledge and advanced practice skills in these areas.

These licensees often do large-scale work including creating systematic changes, program development, education initiatives, research projects, non-profit leadership, and organizing groups. Some also provide non-clinical services for smaller groups such as schools, neighborhoods, hospitals, residential programs, and community centers.

The Board also has a compliance program that reviews cases alleging the unlicensed practice of clinical social work and violations of the professional standards for social workers.

The Board licenses and regulates approximately 8,000 social workers. This number has almost doubled in the last ten years. The Board of Licensed Social Workers has a current staff of seven, including the Executive Director, to handle this work. The licensing unit currently has a staff of three.

An applicant submits their application through a licensing portal. The application process itself requires documentation.

- The applicant must order an official transcript from the school where they graduated. This is reviewed manually.
- The applicant is required to complete the Oregon statute and administrative rules exam which is graded manually.
- All applicants are required to provide a digital scan of their fingerprints so it can be run through LEDS.

- Applicants for a CSWA license must submit a plan of supervision that is approved by their supervisor. The plan of supervision is reviewed by our staff.
- An out of state applicant must request a license certification from any state where they were licensed.
- Out of state applicants who want to transfer supervision and experience hours must also order an official exam score.

All the documentation that is required for the application is primary source verified by our staff, meaning that the document needs to come directly from the institution and our staff has put their eyes on it.

In the past year the agency has faced significant challenges in our licensing program. In addition to the impacts from COVID that all agencies faced, in August of last year we lost one of our three licensing staff. We were not able to fill the position until January of this year, a period of five months.

At the same time, the agency experienced an increased workload. In 2022 the Oregon legislature enacted HB 4071, allocating funds to support the behavioral health workforce. Supported by these funds BLSW has waived fees for all new applications. This was an important step helping to support social workers in Oregon.

The fee waiver applies to both in state and out of state licensed social workers who want to practice in Oregon. As a result, the number of applications from out of state licensees has increased dramatically from 227 this time last year compared to 786 this year, and this has put additional strain on the system.

For those students graduating with their degrees and applying for their Clinical Social Work Associate (CSWA) license, this delay is particularly

harmful. Graduates want to get started on the process for getting their LCSW license. And they need employment.

Most employers - whether they are hospitals, clinics, agencies, or other organizations – will not hire a graduate until they have received their CSWA license. It is a burden on these institutions and a financial burden for graduates.

Our current backlog of all application types is 341.

We have taken several steps to reduce the backlog of licensing applications. First, we are increasing the resources in our licensing unit. The 2023 legislature authorized a half-time OS2 licensing assistant position. We are in the process of filling this position. In addition, two months ago we brought in a temporary position to help with the backlog.

Last month we began a triage process that has prioritized the CSWA license applications. We did this for a couple of reasons. First, there is a critical need for CSWA's at the Oregon State Hospital, OHSU, community health clinics, and hospice facilities to name just a few locations. We know that it is a priority for both the Governor and the legislature to fill this unmet need. Second, as I mentioned earlier, we have a group of graduates who have applied for positions but cannot become employed until they receive their CSWA license. It is a financial hardship for them. Those folks who have a job offer that is waiting on the CSWA license will get the highest priority.

We have also been talking to our IT service provider about our current online application process. We have several requests for upgrades that will speed up the application approval process. For example, we asked our provider to implement an online grading and approval process for

our Oregon statutes and administrative rules exam. We have asked for additional efficiencies that will streamline the approval process.

We think we are moving in the right direction to provide our social work community the service they should expect from us. With our additional resources and prioritizing the Clinical Social Work Associate applications we are working through our backlog. Since August we have reduced the backlog from 219 CSWA applications to 152. As I mentioned, we also expect to see additional improvements with our system upgrade.

We will continue to look for ways to improve our systems and processes with the goal of increasing the number of social workers out in our communities and decreasing the gap in services that we know exists today.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. We will be happy to answer any questions.

Lou Savage, Interim Director

Oregon Board of Licensed Social Workers