

**Testimony of Dr. Shakira A. Kennedy**  
**Executive Director, NASW-New York**  
**In Support of Resolution 362-A – Social Work Workforce Act**  
**Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare**

Good afternoon, members of the Committee on General Welfare. My name is Dr. Shakira A. Kennedy, and I am a licensed social worker (LMSW) and the Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers–New York, representing both upstate and downstate regions. Our association serves over 9,000 social workers across the state.

Today, I offer testimony on behalf of our membership, the NASW-NY Board of Directors and in partnership with Social Workers for Justice in strong support of Resolution 362-A, the Social Work Workforce Act. For the past three years, this legislation has been a top priority of our Advocacy and Government Relations Committee and has received full endorsement from our member-led board.

We support this resolution because we have heard—and many of us have lived—the stories of those demoralized and discouraged by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) licensure exam. Whether they ultimately passed or failed, the experience is too often marked by anxiety, fear, and financial burden.

Many test-takers report doing everything "right": enrolling in prep courses, studying extensively, and taking the exam early—only to fall short of passing by a few points. One test-taker described the exam as *"bogus,"* expressing disbelief at failing multiple times despite rigorous preparation and calling it *"a profit-making machine."* Another shared: *"I failed my exam for the third time... I feel stupid and hopeless... It's like ASWB doesn't want you to pass."* These sentiments are not isolated—they are far too common. The cost of taking the exam can exceed \$800 when factoring in multiple attempts, study materials, and test prep services—an expense that disproportionately affects social workers who are not paid adequately throughout New York and disproportionately candidates of color.

I know this because I lived it.

After graduating from my MSW program, I took the ASWB exam and failed by one point. I was devastated. Years later, I tried again—this time failing by two points. The feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and professional stagnation were overwhelming. It wasn't until after I completed my doctorate and was teaching full time at a graduate school of social work in New York City that I felt confident enough to try again.

What changed? I didn't study the content; I studied the test. I had to unlearn what I knew about social work and learn how to take a standardized exam: how to think like the test-makers, how to interpret key words, and how to strategically choose answers. I even remember being advised to "think like a white woman from Utah." That was the exam-taking strategy. I finally passed the exam—eight months pregnant—but only because I was armed not with deeper knowledge of social work, but with the tools to play the testing game.

Supporters of the exam may argue that people simply need to try harder or study more. They may suggest the test is a fair measure of competence. But that ignores the structural inequities baked into the process. The data is clear: pass rates vary significantly by language, race, and age. This is not about effort, it's about access.

The ASWB exam is not an equitable or culturally responsive measure of readiness to practice. It serves as a gatekeeper that disproportionately excludes the very communities, we need in the social work profession—communities of color, multilingual practitioners, and those from marginalized backgrounds.

We urge the New York City Council to support Resolution 362-A.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.