



## Your association – how it works, what it does

When ASWB (at that time AASSWB—the American Association of State Social Work Boards) began in 1979, its founders were hopeful that the organization could work toward creating an examination that could be used by a few licensing boards. Within 20 years, the association had accomplished that and much more. The licensing examination program remains at the center of the association. Today, the Association of Social Work Boards provides five international examinations, a comprehensive and reliable database of disciplinary actions taken by boards, a continuing education provider approval program, and many other services. ASWB has grown into a strong international organization that helps social work regulatory boards carry out their work effectively and creatively and that provides information to assist boards as they work toward consistency in regulation across jurisdictions.

### ASWB's mission and vision

The focus of ASWB has always been on consumer protection first. By helping to encourage more consistency in regulation, by facilitating the sharing of information among boards, and by providing a valid, reliable examination, ASWB assists its member boards in protecting the public.

The mission of ASWB is to:

Provide support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance safe, competent, and ethical practice to strengthen public protection.

This mission is accompanied by the following vision statement:

All social workers are licensed in order to protect clients and client systems.

## An association of boards

**The Association of Social Work Boards is, at its core, an organization made up of its member boards.** Boards, through their delegates, set broad association policy, elect ASWB leadership, and make important decisions about the overall direction and positions of the organization.

Because ASWB is driven by its member boards, boards can collectively develop and use programs that might be too costly or labor-intensive for any single regulatory body. Examination programs, for example, are highly complex, expensive operations that require constant maintenance. For most boards, mounting a defensible examination program would be impossible. Through ASWB, however, boards can have access to and control over an international examination program, a program that provides consistency that strengthens regulation.

Similarly, other programs—such as the ASWB Approved Continuing Education (ACE) program, the Social Work Registry, and the association’s application processing and continuing education audit services—can free boards and their staff from some administrative burdens without “outsourcing” to private agencies that may or may not be responsive and may not share the focus on public protection. Additionally, programs such as New Board Member Training, the Administrators Workshop, Executive Leadership Training, and the Public Protection Database (PPD) allow boards to carry out their own responsibilities more effectively.

The association holds two meetings every year—an educational conference and a business meeting.

## Governance

### **The Delegate Assembly**

The Association of Social Work Boards is controlled by its Delegate Assembly, a governing body made up of one delegate from each member jurisdiction. Delegates meet during the ASWB Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly. At the meeting, the assembly receives reports on various ASWB programs, elects members of the association’s Board of Directors and Nominating Committee, and votes on recommendations and motions brought forward by the Board of Directors, various ASWB committees,



Since 1994, ASWB has funded one delegate from each member jurisdiction to attend the association’s Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly.

or the assembly itself. Each member board gets one vote in the Delegate Assembly. Most motions require a simple majority to pass.

The Delegate Assembly has specific powers reserved for it through the ASWB bylaws, but it also has fairly wide latitude to shape association policy and programs. Since 1994, ASWB has funded attendance for one delegate from every jurisdiction that chooses to participate in the ASWB Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly, to ensure the most complete participation possible.

### The Board of Directors

The ASWB Board of Directors is elected by the Delegate Assembly and oversees the ongoing business of the association. In 2015, the Delegate Assembly voted to amend the bylaws to increase the size of the Board of Directors to 11 members: president, president-elect/past president (alternating years), secretary, treasurer, and seven directors at large. At least two members of the Board must be public members, and one at-large seat is reserved for a current staff member of a member board. The association president must be a licensed social worker.

### Committees and Task Forces

The association relies heavily on volunteers to oversee several important elements of the organization. The members of these volunteer committees are appointed by the president after approval from the Board at the beginning of each year, with a few exceptions. Current committees include:



The ASWB Examination Committee is demanding volunteer work, requiring members to attend as many as four 3-day meetings a year.

**Examination Committee.** This committee is responsible for overseeing the questions, or items, on the ASWB examinations. Examination Committee members are carefully selected for ethnic, geographic, and practice setting diversity, and they need not be members of a social work regulatory board. Members of the Examination Committee are drawn from the ASWB item writer program.

**Finance Committee.** The Finance Committee monitors ASWB revenues and expenditures, and helps the Board of Directors develop policies and procedures to maintain the overall financial health of the organization.

**Bylaws and Resolutions Committee.** This committee reviews all proposed changes to the ASWB bylaws as well as any resolutions that are forwarded to the Delegate Assembly. The committee can also draft its own proposals for bylaws amendments.

**Nominating Committee.** This elected committee creates the slate of candidates for all elected positions within the association.

**Regulation and Standards (RAS) Committee.** The RAS Committee's primary responsibility centers on the ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act. The committee conducts regular reviews of the model act and addresses emerging issues in social work regulation.

**Regulatory Education and Leadership (REAL) Committee.** The REAL Committee is responsible for developing the programs presented at the ASWB education conference.

**Continuing Competence Committee.** The Continuing Competence Committee is primarily responsible for researching and developing best practices related to continuing competence in social work regulation and setting standards for the continuing education approval programs at ASWB.

**Practice Analysis Task Force.** Not a standing committee, this group is created whenever ASWB conducts the surveys of social work practice necessary for the examination program. The most recent practice analysis began in 2015, and new exams were released in January 2018.

## Association office

ASWB is headquartered in Culpeper, Va. The staff at the association office are responsible for the daily operations of the association, from supporting volunteers and committee work to registering candidates for the social work exams. The work of the staff is guided by the Board of Directors, by way of the Chief Executive Officer, and through policy.

## ASWB services

The range of services provided by the association has expanded to meet the needs of its membership. With the exception of the examination program—the use of which is required by every member that uses an exam—the programs offered by ASWB are voluntary, to be used by each member board as it prefers.

As an extension of the services directly related to its members, ASWB also works to educate social workers, social work students, schools of social work, and the public on issues related to licensure and regulation. These programs, which include the Path to Licensure program as well as informational brochures, website content, conference exhibits, and presentations, range from explanations of examination construction to discussions of broad regulatory issues such as licensure exemptions and Internet-based practice.

There is no cost to member boards for the following services and programs, unless otherwise noted.

**Public Protection Database (PPD).** The PPD is a repository of information on U.S. and Canadian regulatory board actions and activities taken relative to licensees and licensure applicants. This cooperative effort among boards has resulted in an effective tool for board use during license application and renewal processes. Boards can use the PPD as a flagging system—particularly when reviewing an application from a social worker previously licensed in another jurisdiction.

**NPDB Reporting Service.** The U.S. federal government now requires all health-related regulatory bodies to submit regular disciplinary reports to the National Practitioner Data Bank (NPDB). ASWB has been approved as an official reporting agent for social work boards and can process and forward a member board's reports to the federal system.

**Regulatory Training and Leadership programs.** The association offers training sessions intended to help new members of regulatory boards become familiar with their roles, the responsibilities of the regulatory board, and the ways in which ASWB can help. A similar program is offered for member board administrative

staff to help them understand their role. Executive Leadership Training is offered to teams comprising the board chair and board administrator to help them work effectively together. Attendance is funded by ASWB for a limited number of participants at each session.

Typically, three NBMT sessions are conducted each year, one in the spring, another during the summer, and a third in the fall. One Administrators Workshop is held every two years, usually in the fall. The first Executive Leadership Training took place in summer 2018. Most sessions are held in the Northern Virginia area near Washington, D.C., but ASWB will conduct these sessions in other parts of the U.S. and Canada upon request.

**ASWB Approved Continuing Education (ACE) program.**

The ASWB ACE program helps boards, continuing education providers, and social workers by standardizing continuing education approval and identifying high-quality continuing education programs. ACE approval from ASWB is an acknowledgment of a CE provider's qualifications to present, monitor, and maintain quality social work continuing education offerings. Boards use ACE approval status in a variety of ways, from accepting all CE offered by ACE providers to using ACE approval as one factor in reviews of CE.

**New Jersey CE Course Approval.** ASWB is a contracted approval organization for CE courses.

**Joint Accreditation collaboration.** In 2018, ASWB joined the Joint Accreditation collaborative, which allows participating providers of interprofessional continuing education to extend their offerings to social workers on the health care team and use the ACE logo in their credit listings. Joint Accreditation standards are equal to or exceed ACE standards for high-quality, relevant CE.

**ASWB Social Work Registry (now PROfile).** The Registry was designed as a repository for social worker credential information and to serve as a verification source for social work boards. ASWB is integrating the Registry, now called PROfile, into the applications platform being developed to provide member boards



**Mobility website.**

A website dedicated to ASWB's initiative for Social Work Practice Mobility and Licensure Portability was launched in 2016 at [www.MovingSocialWork.org](http://www.MovingSocialWork.org)

streamlined access to ASWB services, including access to documentation for social workers who enroll in the ASWB PROfile service.

**Continuing education audit service.** The association is available to conduct audits of licensee continuing education compliance for purposes of license renewal. Contracts for this service are created to fit the individual needs of member boards.

**Application processing.** The association can serve as a screening service for the processing of initial licensure applications and the issuance (after member board approval) of final licensure documents and notification. Contracts for this service are created to fit the individual needs of member boards.

**Model Social Work Practice Act.** The model act is a resource designed to provide regulatory boards with a practice act that draws on best practices. The ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act contains laws, regulations, and accompanying explanations that can help boards that are attempting to amend their own laws and regulations.

**ASWB website/Members website.** The association's website ([www.aswb.org](http://www.aswb.org)) supplies visitors with extensive information on social work regulation and the examinations. The ASWB website places special emphasis on providing information to social workers who want to learn more about licensure and continuing education, and includes regulatory information from every state and province. The Members subdomain website is dedicated to member boards, organized to provide information useful to regulators.

**Administrators email group.** Staff of regulatory boards may participate in an ASWB-sponsored email group that encourages discussion of issues and the sharing of information electronically. The administrator message list is used extensively by administrators to post questions. To join the administrators group, contact ASWB at [csanner@aswb.org](mailto:csanner@aswb.org).

**Education Conference.** The annual education conference allows members of social work regulatory boards to participate in programs delivered by internationally recognized speakers, as well as by leaders within ASWB. Past meeting topics have included continuing competence, social work ethics, supervision, Internet-based practice, and practice mobility.

**Administrators Forum.** These meetings, scheduled twice a year to coincide with each Education Conference and Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly, provide an opportunity for social work board administrators to discuss mutual concerns and interests and share ideas.

**Board Member Exchange.** These meetings support regulatory leadership development of ASWB member board members through the sharing of experiences and mentoring. Regulatory education and problem-solving may also be included. Meetings take place twice a year, at the Education Conference and the Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly.

**Social media.** ASWB maintains a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest to increase outreach and quickly disseminate information to exam candidates and other stakeholders.

**ASWB publications.** The association offers a range of publications on different topics. These include:

*Association news.* A bimonthly e-newsletter that keeps member boards up to date on happenings within the association and throughout the regulatory community.

*Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice.* These standards were developed to help guide social work regulators as they consider how to embrace technology and regulate its use in social work practice.



**Laws and Regs Database.** This online resource helps users to explore the laws and regulations in the U.S. and Canada. It can be found at: <https://www.aswb.org/licensees/about-licensing-and-regulation/social-work-regulation/>

*Technology Standards for Social Work Practice.* The standards for technology in social work practice were written through the collaboration of NASW, CSWE, the Clinical Social Work Association, and ASWB after publication of ASWB's Model Regulatory Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice. The practice standards, published by NASW, are complementary to the regulatory technology standards and provide guidance for social work professionals.

*Social work laws and regs database.* This online database, found at [www.aswb.org](http://www.aswb.org), contains information on every social work regulatory board in the U.S. and Canada.

*Keep your board from riding off into the sunset.* Regulatory boards facing so-called "sunset" provisions in the United States can use this online publication to help them prepare for the review process.

*Legislative resources.* To support members' education and advocacy efforts, ASWB has prepared talking points about social work regulation topics. ASWB is always willing to add topics upon request. ASWB will also submit letters supporting regulation of social work to legislatures upon request.

*Informational brochures.* ASWB produces a variety of brochures on different topics, ranging from the basics of licensure to advice to social workers seeking continuing education to brochures about the role of regulation in public protection.

*Curricular Guide for Licensing and Regulation.* This guide was developed through the collaboration of CSWE, NASW Insurance Group RRG, and ASWB to explain how licensing and regulation relate to the nine competencies required for social work program accreditation by CSWE. The guide, published by CSWE, is available to all social work faculty and includes in-class activities, assignments, and field experiences designed to help students understand the impact of licensing on their social work practice.

*Exam guide and online practice tests.* For candidates preparing for the social work examinations, the association publishes the *ASWB Guide to the Social Work Exams* as well as full-scale online practice tests for the Bachelors, Masters, and Clinical examinations.

*Group review practice tests.* The association offers sets of sample test questions for use in group instructional settings by accredited social work educational programs.

## **The social work licensing examinations**

The licensure examinations developed by ASWB are the single most important service provided by the association. Each year, the association devotes more than 50 percent of its budget to examination development and maintenance. Hundreds of volunteer and staff hours are devoted each year to keeping the ASWB examinations valid and reliable measures of social work competence.

The ASWB examinations are called “high stakes” examinations for good reason: In order to become licensed and call themselves social workers (pursuing their chosen profession), candidates for licensure must pass the exam. Because boards rely on these examinations to help them make decisions in the interest of public protection, the construction, validation, and maintenance of the testing program are extremely important.

## The basics – testing format and delivery

The ASWB examination program is one of the larger health care licensure testing systems, with a volume that has grown to exceed 50,000 administrations annually. The ASWB examinations are the only social work licensing examinations with an international scope and standardized passing scores.

The ASWB examinations are offered in five categories:

- Associate, targeted at applicants without a social work degree, offered in a few jurisdictions
- Bachelors, appropriate for BSWs with 0-2 years of experience
- Masters, for use by MSWs with 0-2 years of experience
- Advanced Generalist, for MSWs with 2-5 years of post-degree experience in non-clinical settings
- Clinical, for MSWs with 2-5 years of post-degree experience in clinical settings

Each exam consists of 170 multiple-choice items, 20 of which are nonscored “pretest” items. Test-takers have four hours to complete the examination. Content outlines for all exam categories are found on [www.aswb.org](http://www.aswb.org).

The association works with a testing contractor that provides psychometric and administration support services. Tests are administered at more than 225 testing sites worldwide. Candidates take the exam on computers in the test centers. They receive unofficial score reports with their unofficial pass/fail status at the conclusion of their exam. Official score reports are sent to jurisdictions each week.

At present, five Canadian jurisdictions—Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Saskatchewan—contract with ASWB to use the examinations for licensure. Others are in the planning process.

## The watchwords – validity and reliability

The main challenge to a licensure testing program is to find the theoretical line that separates those who are *minimally* competent at entry to practice from those who are not. Legal regulation’s focus is on making determinations that protect the

public from incompetent practice—regulatory bodies cannot restrict licenses to only those practitioners who demonstrate excellence, because excellence and competence are different concepts. In turn, licensing examinations must be able to measure *minimum* competency and must be able to do so consistently—they must, in other words, be **valid** and **reliable**. Validity and reliability are intertwined terms that, together, establish the legal defensibility of a testing program.

**Validity**, as it is used in licensing examination programs, refers to the extent to which a test measures what it is supposed to be measuring and the test’s ability to ensure that minimally competent candidates are passing the examination and that minimally incompetent candidates are not passing. Validity is accomplished primarily through the way the test is constructed and the method by which passing scores are set. The central component of the ASWB examination program’s overall validity rests with the practice analysis process (see next section).

**Reliability** is a function of the tests after they have been constructed. It refers to the consistency of an examination. A highly reliable test is one that produces similar scores for each test-taker time after time. The reliability of the ASWB examinations is maintained through its test development efforts and the statistical monitoring of individual item (test question) and candidate performance.

Together, validity and reliability are the foundation for the examination program’s legal defensibility as a fair and consistent tool to help boards make minimum competence decisions as part of the licensure process.

## Constructing the examinations—the practice analysis

The ASWB examinations are based on periodic practice analyses. The practice analysis begins with a survey of social work practice in a wide variety of settings across the United States and Canada. Its results shape the actual questions that appear on the examinations, as well as the need for a particular examination

at a particular category of practice. From the job analysis, ASWB finds out what social workers are doing at various categories of practice.

The practice analysis survey lists a series of tasks common to social work. Participants are asked to rate how often they perform each task; how critical knowledge of the task is, regardless of how often it is performed; and whether the ability to perform the task is a necessary entry-level skill at their particular category of practice. The results give ASWB a highly accurate profile of social work and help the association to establish the various categories of examinations offered. The entire job analysis is based on standards set out in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing developed by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education.

ASWB conducted its first practice analysis in 1980-81, with a practice analysis verification study completed in 1988. The next practice analyses were completed in 1996, 2003, and 2009. The sixth and most current practice analysis began in 2015, and results were reflected on the exams beginning in January 2018.

After survey results have been compiled and tabulated, subject matter experts sift through the ratings and identify those tasks critical to entry-level practice. Once the most important tasks have been identified, content experts target the knowledge areas that are essential to performing a particular task. Usually, several knowledge areas are attached to any one task, reflecting the complexity of social work practice.

With task and knowledge areas defined, content outlines—also called examination blueprints—are created. The content outline is the skeletal version of the examination itself, with content headings and subheadings indicating the percentage of items relating to each topic. These content outlines, one for each category of the ASWB examinations, are built on the results of the practice analysis and guide all item development. The blueprints for the current exams went online in 2017.

In the final step, examinations are created to fit the blueprints, and passing scores (or cut scores) are set using a psychometric process called a modified Angoff method. In this method, social work experts review examination questions on the basis of the abilities of a “minimally competent” practitioner. Each expert then makes decisions on the probability that this practitioner will answer questions correctly. The judgments are averaged, and the averages are used to compute a recommended cut score for the examination as a whole.

The 2003 practice analysis was the first to incorporate data from the Canadian provinces. Analyses comparing the results from the United States and Canada demonstrated a high level of commonality and led to ASWB's decision to create a unified content outline and passing score for all test-takers at each examination category. The 2009 and 2015 practice analyses also substantiated the appropriateness of the ASWB examinations for use throughout North America.

## Test development

For each category of examination, ASWB maintains a bank of questions, or items, coded to specific content areas. These items are written by social work practitioners across the United States and Canada who have been contracted to write for various areas of practice. The item writers are selected by the association to ensure an appropriate representation of practice, ethnic, racial, and geographic diversity. Writers chosen are trained in the fine points of item writing.

Once created and edited, items are presented to the ASWB Examination Committee. This committee is an essential element in the continued health of the examination program and, like the item writing group, is carefully selected to reflect the diversity of the social work profession. At each of its meetings, the Examination Committee reviews items for possible inclusion on the examinations as “pretest” items—the audition that every item receives as a nonscored question on an ASWB examination.

Every item approved for use in the ASWB item pool is coded and statistically tracked, both during its pretest phase and through its use as a scored item. Before any item can be included in the pool of standard scored items, it must perform acceptably as a nonscored pretest item. There are 20 pretest items on every ASWB examination, mixed in with regular scored items. All pretest items must have several hundred responses before a statistical analysis of its function is meaningful.

The statistical tracking also allows ASWB to attach a difficulty rating to each question. The ratings play an important role in the way the examinations are scored. They allow ASWB to create multiple versions of an examination while keeping overall difficulty constant. (See “equating” next.)

To maintain a high level of security, ASWB creates several versions of each examination, called “forms,” with different items testing the same content. Examination candidates are tracked and linked to specific forms, so that a failed candidate who retakes the test will never be presented with the same version of an examination.

## Equating – keeping the difficulty consistent

When examination forms are created, the individual difficulty levels of the items are accounted for in the passing score for that particular form. Put simply, it is quite possible that any given combination of items will result in a test that is more or less difficult than another form. But passing scores on individual forms are calibrated to the same level of difficulty as the original form on which the anchor score was set. The passing score adjustments mean that, in the end, passing each test requires the same level of overall ability, even though questions may vary. The process for accounting for differences in overall difficulty is known as equating.

This statistical/psychometric process is of course not apparent to test-takers, except that equating makes it impossible to establish an unchanging number of items that need to be answered correctly in order to pass every form of each category of ASWB examination. Candidates taking one form of the examination

### **CASE FILE:**

## **ADA**

Rush v.  
National Board of  
Medical Examiners  
*268 F. Supp.2d 673*  
*(D.C. TX) 2003)*



## **What's this?**

Throughout this manual, you will find boxed “CASE FILE” notes. These are court cases that help to illustrate some of the concepts being addressed here. The reference information under the name of the case (in this example, “268 F. Supp.2d 673,” etc.) can help you or your legal counsel locate further information on the case.

may have to answer more or fewer questions correctly than candidates taking another form. These variations—typically very slight—are accounted for in the passing score set for each form.

## Consistency across jurisdictions – scaling

Although ASWB does not recommend that scores be referred to in law, some jurisdictions have set a “passing score” for examinees—a “70” or “75” may be cited as the minimum acceptable score for purposes of licensure. However, this does not mean that passing the ASWB examination is easier in some jurisdictions than in others.

The association uses a process called “scaling” to ensure that the pass point remains consistent. Scaling allows the association to translate a candidate's raw score—the number of questions answered correctly—into the score scale used in a particular jurisdiction. For example, if a candidate correctly answers exactly the minimum number of questions required to pass a form of the exam, that score would be reported as a “70” in jurisdictions that have set passing performance at 70, and as a “75” in those jurisdictions that use a 75 scale. This scaled score is reported only to boards. Candidates receive unofficial score reports that identify exactly how many questions they answered correctly, and how many had to be correctly answered to pass the examination.

For candidates who pass the test in one jurisdiction and later request that their scores be forwarded to another for purposes of licensure, their performance is reported as a “pass” or “fail.” Some jurisdictions have opted to have scores reported as “pass/fail” notifications, rather than as a scaled score.

## Administration policies

The social work licensing examinations are intended to be measures of social work knowledge and not tests of reading, deduction, or the values of one culture over another. To guard against overly complex language, all examination items are thoroughly edited for simplicity and straightforward language; jargon is eliminated wherever possible, and readability tests have been conducted on the examinations.

Cultural bias is also monitored closely. The association takes steps to guard against this bias by including diverse participants in every phase of examination development and item writing. Further, individual test items are monitored for the presence of Differential Item Functioning (DIF), or the tendency for one subgroup of test-takers to answer the item in ways that are disproportionate. When consistent DIF is identified in an item—usually in pretest items that are being tested for possible scored use—the item is returned to the Examination Committee for further assessment.

ASWB is also sensitive to the special needs of test-takers. Long before the United States adopted the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), the association was providing accommodations to candidates with disabilities. Such accommodations continue today, ranging from audiotape and Braille examinations to the provision of readers and sign language interpreters. There are also allowances for extra time in which to complete the examination. Jurisdictions permitting, ASWB also makes arrangements for test-takers whose primary language is something other than English. Typically, English as a second language (ESL) candidates are allowed the use of up to two dictionaries (one of which may be a standard English dictionary), and additional time to complete the test.