

Significant Licensure Updates for Florida Social Workers

After three days of Board Meetings – the 491 Licensure Board Meeting in Tampa and the virtual NASW Florida Board Meeting, I'm excited to share several significant licensure exam updates.

Update for 491 Registered Clinical Social Work Interns affected by the “5-year rule” whose internship permanently expires March 31, 2022.

What is the problem and who it impacts:

It is estimated that more than 2,000 Florida Registered Clinical Social Work Interns, who are registered over 5 years come March 2022, are slated to lose their Intern status. This means, they will be “dropped” and no longer able to identify and work as “clinical” social workers. The law is very clear, as written, that those affected will not be able to re-apply, although there is an up-to-two-year extension if supervision wasn't completed at that time. The law clearly states there is NO extension if they have not passed their licensure exams. We continue working behind the scenes to protect some of the best social workers we know.

What's the update?

This week, thanks goes to Janet Hartman, the Executive Director of the 491 Board who created and received Board approval for a process allowing “former Registered Interns” to re-take their examinations. Even if affected social workers lose their Registered Intern Status, the 491 Board will submit approval notices to ASWB, keeping a pathway to retake the clinical exam. For those who pass, (even after losing their intern status), they can re-apply to the 491 Board to be a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW).

What this means:

Passing the exam is still an emergency – and critically important to pass it by March 2022. BUT for many social workers unable to pass their exams, this may (temporarily) take the pressure off. We are breathing a huge sigh of relief for this newly opened avenue because it means that losing intern status with the 491 Board doesn't end someone's licensure dream. For those not practicing clinically with no risk of job loss, this is a BIG win. BUT... it isn't all good news – especially for folks in clinical positions. There are still HUGE advantages to getting this done before the March cutoff.

Cautions:

This does not change the law. If you haven't passed your exam within the next six or seven months, you will no longer be a Registered Clinical Social Work Intern. For any of you who work in clinical settings or require this status to keep your jobs, this “workaround” may not help you.

Update for new social workers affected by ASWB's “18-month rule”.

At NASW's request, the 491 Board asked ASWB (the exam providers) for an extension of this rule, which would have stopped new MSWs from taking the clinical licensure exam prior to completing 18 months of supervision. ASWB met earlier this month and granted an extension to the 491 Board until January 1, 2023. The 491 Board approved this extension.

What this means:

If you are a new graduate, who is a registered clinical social work intern and who was unable to register for the exam, (because this rule was supposed to be implemented this past June), you CAN NOW register and take the exam before waiting 18 months. You must take and pass your exam before the extended date of January 2023 or wait the full 18 months. If you are a new social work graduate who hasn't registered yet, or a social work master's student who plans to practice in Florida and is graduating no later than Summer 2022, you should be able to register AND take your exam without the forced delay.

Cautions:

This is a temporary fix. ASWB has not changed their position on keeping the clinical exam out of the hands of new social workers. COVID-19 challenges for our folks are what convinced them to grant the temporary extension. Social work students who graduate in Winter 2022 or later will have to wait until they've had 18 months of supervision to test.

How can you help us move forward?

We cannot stop the law from going into effect and ONLY a change in this law can protect all our social workers. We understand that there are many reasons why social workers struggle to pass their exams – and we believe many of these reasons are correlated with issues of access and social justice. NASW-FL shared some ideas with the 491 Board about some changes to the law we hope to propose.

We want to ensure that social work remains a competitive profession in Florida. Both MFTS and MHCS take their exams directly out of graduate school. NASW-FL has advocated and partnered with the 491 Board and earned this temporary reprieve. We need you to support our efforts as we move forward to support our profession, Florida social workers and the people we serve.