

# ACCESS DENIED: THREATS TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION, ACCREDITATION, AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE

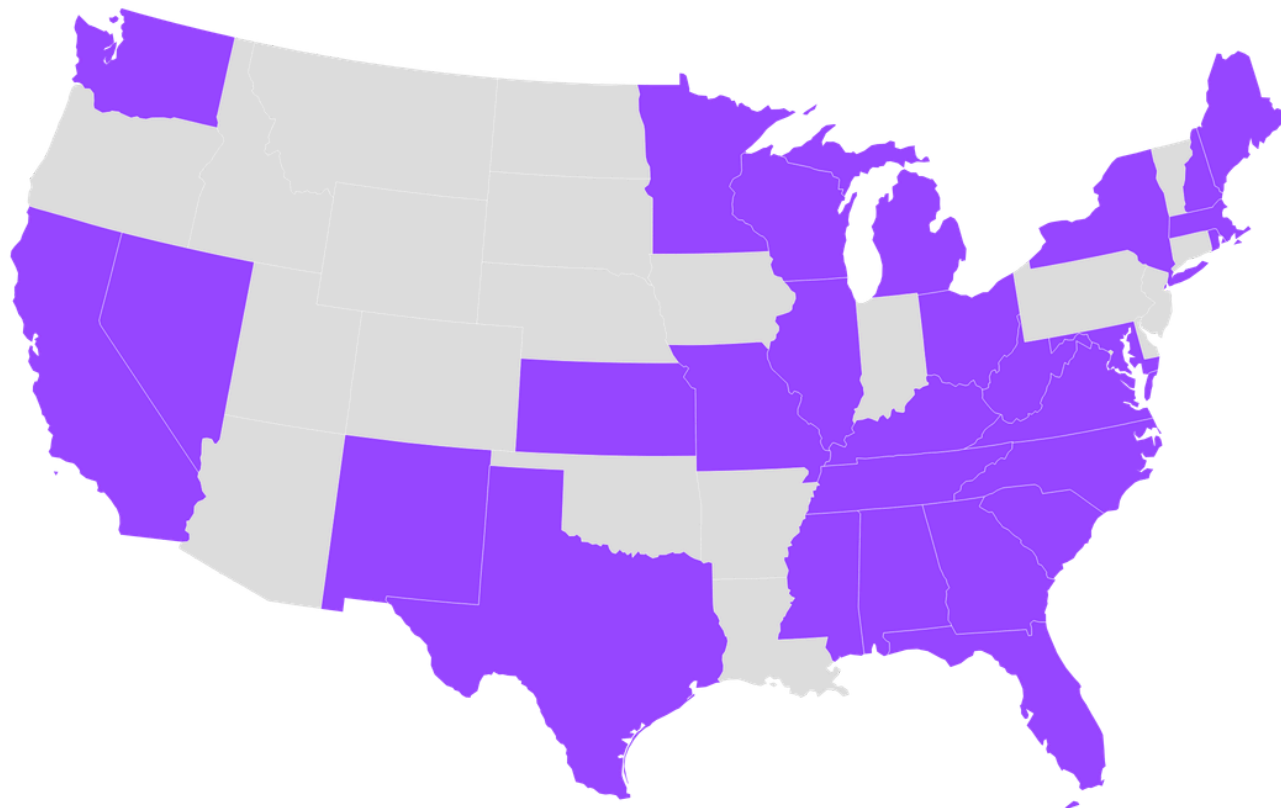
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## Participant Map

**340 participants from the United States, Ethiopia, and Nigeria joined the conversation**



Boston University School of Social Work  
Center for Innovation in Social Work & Health

## Session Summary

### Overview of the Beyond 2025 Action Hub

- CISWH runs four labs focused on social work innovation, health equity, global public health, and power-building leadership.
- The Beyond 2025 Action Hub, under the Power Building and Leadership Lab, provides a searchable database of over 1,300 policy proposals, an advocacy toolkit, a webinar series (Critical Conversations), and Open Dialogue sessions to help social workers and public health practitioners respond to current policy threats.

### Moral Injury and Workforce Strain in Social Work

- Social workers are experiencing widespread burnout and moral injury due to organizational culture shifts, increased caseloads, and policy changes that conflict with personal and social work values.
- The departure of social workers from the VA was highlighted as a microcosm of what is happening across the country.

### Federal Student Loan Changes ("One Big Beautiful Bill Act")

- The OBBB, signed into law on July 4th of last year, introduced new borrowing limits: \$20,500/year or \$41,000 total for a two-year graduate program, and a \$100,000 lifetime cap for graduate students.
- Social work was reclassified from "professional student" to "graduate student" status during the regulatory rulemaking process — not by Congress directly — resulting in lower borrowing limits. Psychology successfully lobbied to be re-added to the professional category; social work was not.
- The Grad Plus loan program was eliminated, and changes were made to income-based repayment plans. Students seeking Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) must take proactive steps to enroll in the Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP); private and state-backed student loans are not PSLF-eligible.

- The definition of an "eligible employer" for PSLF was narrowed, excluding service at organizations such as those serving transgender youth.
- Current MSW students who are already borrowing and remain continuously enrolled are protected as "continuing borrowers" for a three-year window; new students starting July 1 face the new limits.
- Over 19,631 public comments (3,985 related to social work) were submitted to the Reimagining and Improving Student Education (RISE) Negotiating Committee's proposed changes to align Department of Education policies with the OBBB Act.

## **Impact of Loan Limits on MSW Programs and the Workforce**

- Analysis of all 349 CSWE-accredited MSW programs showed a national median full-time in-state tuition of ~\$35,175 for two years — below the new limit for two-year program — but programs in urban areas and at private institutions frequently exceed \$41,000.
- When living expenses are factored in (adding ~\$40,000), virtually all students across the country could face financing barriers.
- Likely impacts include declining enrollment, students choosing cheaper or less suitable programs, delayed matriculation, increased enrollment in part-time programs, increased reliance on predatory private lenders, and reduced diversity in the applicant pool — disproportionately affecting first-generation, low-income, LGBTQ+, older students, and students of color.
- More affordable programs are in locations that might not be the safest or best option for LGBTQ+ and students of color. In addition, programs in urban areas may offer more options for housing, transportation, and practicum placement offerings.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 74,000 social work job openings per year for the next decade, and a shrinking pipeline could worsen an already strained workforce.
- Social workers contribute ~\$85 billion annually to the U.S. economy and support approximately 250,000 jobs through their spending.

## Threats to Accreditation (Executive Order & AIM Rulemaking)

- President Trump signed Executive Order 14279 in April of last year targeting accreditation, calling it a "secret weapon" to disrupt higher education, with a focus on eliminating DEI standards from accreditation bodies.
- CSWE accreditation is recognized through CHEA, not directly through the Department of Education (ED), giving it some indirect protection. Several pathways for disruption exist, including pressure on CHEA to remove DEI standards and forcing CSWE to obtain federal recognition. Other threats are already being implemented by the ED, including accepting new accreditors, and allowing institutions to switch to competing accrediting bodies.
- The AIM (Accreditation Innovation and Modernization) negotiated rulemaking committee is the key venue to watch and engage with; nominations for negotiators closed February 26th, with public meetings to follow in April and May.
- Several states (Florida, Texas, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Oklahoma) are advancing legislation to move away from CSWE and toward alternative accrediting bodies. Social workers in these states report feeling the consequences of these proposed changes .

## Potential Consequences for the Profession

- If CSWE is forced to drop DEI from its standards or loses its dual role as accreditor and advocacy voice, the profession could lose cohesion, see fragmented licensing standards across states, and face a weakened professional identity.
- Some allied fields (medicine, law, psychology, physical therapy) have already removed DEI language from their standards.

## Call to Action

- Participants were urged to engage with the AIM rulemaking public comment process, advocate to protect CSWE's independence, build relationships with state higher education legislators, and share information widely with colleagues and policymakers.

## Chat Summary

### Greetings & Introductions

- Participants from across the country (and internationally, including Ethiopia and Nigeria) introduced themselves at the start, reflecting the broad geographic reach of the webinar.

### Reactions to Student Loan Changes

- Several participants expressed concern about the practical impacts of the new borrowing limits, including:
  - Worry about social work's prestige, reputation, and standing in professional settings like courts
  - The likelihood that loan limits could push employers toward sponsored/contracted education arrangements, which could limit social workers' career mobility
  - Frustration that social workers were deemed "essential" during COVID but are now being de-professionalized
  - A note clarifying that PSLF-eligible employer definitions have not yet changed as of the webinar, with changes scheduled for July 1, 2026
  - A question about whether schools might lower tuition in response
  - An observation that the OBBB privatized loans while simultaneously making private loans ineligible for PSLF, seemingly contradictory, though it is the Administration's goal

### Professional Recognition & Advocacy

- Participants expressed frustration about the ongoing struggle for professional acknowledgment, particularly in school settings, including concerns about Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) requiring a clinical license in addition to the DESE license without a supervision structure
- Several voiced support for electing more social workers to government at all levels

- A pointed observation was made that attacks on professional accreditation are characteristic of authoritarian regimes and have the potential to fundamentally alter what social workers can teach and practice — a sentiment echoed by several others
- Discussion about the role of National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and other national organizations in lobbying for the profession

## **Accreditation Concerns**

- A participant from South Carolina confirmed that accreditation-related changes are already being felt at the state level
- Questions were raised about whether CSWE might capitulate to pressure to remove DEI standards, and whether international accreditation bodies (like International Federation of Social Workers) could step in to support federal loan eligibility
- Participants from states named in the state-level legislation discussion (Florida, Texas, South Carolina, etc.) were encouraged to share what they're seeing on the ground



## Session Resources

**ProPublica:** [Veterans Who Depend on Mental Health Care Keep Losing Their Therapists Under Trump](#)

**Heritage Foundation:** [Project 2025 Full Text](#)

**Congress.gov:** [OBBBA Federal Register](#)

**Columbia University:** [Changes to 2026 - 2027 Federal Student Loans](#)

**U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics:** [Social Workers Occupational Outlook Handbook](#)

**Inside Higher Ed:** [Trump's 'Secret Weapon'? College Accreditation](#)

**GovInfo:** [Executive Order 14279](#)

**Oklahoma Voice:** [Oklahoma lawmakers advance anti-DEI higher education bill impacting university accreditation](#)

**CISWH:** [Dr. Tami Gouveia's Response to ED Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for Reimagining and Improving Student Education](#)

## Participant Resources

**Social Work:** [The Reimagining and Improving Student Education \(RISE\), Negotiated Rulemaking and Social Work: How Changes to Federal Loans Undermine the Profession, the Social Safety Net, and Access to Care](#)

**Council for Higher Education Accreditation:** [Accrediting Organizations Recognized by CHEA](#)

## Q&A

**Question 1: I'm concerned about the non-professional status as far as education & training. What would be the possible ramification in how social workers are viewed in respect to hiring, insurance reimbursement, job security and advocacy on the difference that social workers bring to the agencies, health care institutes?**

The reclassification of social work students from professional to graduate status, a designation that affects how much federal loan money they can access, carries consequences that reach well beyond tuition bills.

The change signals to employers, payers, and the broader healthcare system that social workers are not professionals to be taken seriously. In some care settings, that dynamic already plays out as social workers are sidelined on care teams and their expertise is discounted. The reclassification could entrench this challenge further.

The stakes extend to accreditation as well. The Council on Social Work Education's standards underpin licensure and certification requirements across the country, and those credentials signal to hospitals, agencies, and insurers that a social worker's training meets a recognized professional bar. If those standards are diluted or if competing accrediting bodies emerge with lower benchmarks, the profession risks losing the coherent identity it has built over more than a century.

**Question 2: Where was NASW and other social work organizations in lobbying for protection?**

National social work organizations were active on Capitol Hill throughout the rule-making process, though the outcome of those efforts remains uncertain.

At least one major national organization was pushing really hard and talking to folks every single day. Research into the economic value of social work will help make the case for investing in social work education and the workforce.

CISWH is currently examining the economic value of social work, which is providing concrete data about the profession's contributions to the U.S. economy; estimated at roughly \$85 billion annually and supporting some 250,000 jobs.

The Council on Social Work Education plays a dual role as both the profession's accrediting body and a membership association with a lobbying presence in Washington. Social workers have historically been reluctant to talk about money and political leverage. The profession will benefit from becoming more fluent in both to help protect social workers and our clients from future threats. These are two things that are really important for us as professionals.

### **Question 3: So will schools respond by lowering tuition costs?**

Don't expect a uniform response and don't count on tuition cuts to arrive automatically.

The picture will vary sharply by region and institution type, with private schools in the Northeast facing very different pressures than public programs in the South and Midwest, where median tuition for a two-year MSW degree already falls below the new federal borrowing cap of \$41,000. The real crunch will hit harder in urban areas, where most of the programs with tuition exceeding the new limits are concentrated.

Rather than waiting for schools to act, faculty and administrators are being urged to start the conversation internally with department chairs, deans, and colleagues and to begin building relationships with state legislators on higher education committees before a crisis forces the issue. The case for social work programs is straightforward: point to the concrete work social workers do every day in schools, at hospital bedsides, in behavioral health and substance use treatment and let that record speak for itself.

**Question 4: As we know, things tend to happen in a ripple effect. How can these changes in access to education possibly change the landscape of licensure since that varies from state to state? We know that in some states it takes longer to become licensed than others.**

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**Question 5: Any speculation on how or if this may affect licensure policies?**

The threat to licensure is real and underappreciated, even if specific predictions are hard to make given the wide variability in state requirements. The connection runs through accreditation: CSWE's standards are what tie a social work degree to the licensure and certification requirements that govern practice in all 50 states. If those standards are weakened through competing accrediting bodies or politically pressured revisions, the licensing framework could be at risk.

Project 2025's stated preference for state-level control makes that scenario more plausible with legislative activity already underway in several states. We need to defend the independence of CSWE and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation, the body that recognizes CSWE's authority.

That independence is what has kept accreditation, and by extension, licensure, from becoming a political football. It's not about being politicized. It's about upholding our values as a profession.