



**National Association of Social Workers - New Jersey Chapter**  
**Testimony of Jeffrey Feldman, Director of Advocacy & Communications**  
**Regarding S-1589**  
**January 17, 2019**

Good morning Madame Chairperson and distinguished Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on bill S-1589. My name is Jeff Feldman and I am the Director of Advocacy & Communications for the National Association of Social Workers - New Jersey Chapter (NASW-NJ). The National Association of Social Workers is the largest organization of professional social workers in the world. The New Jersey Chapter, with nearly 7,000 members, is one of the largest in the nation. Today, I sit before you, representing the more than 20,000 professional social workers across our state and the hundreds of thousands of clients we serve each day.

I am here today to offer testimony in **SUPPORT** of S-1589, which addresses standards for professional licensing and occupational boards considering applicants with criminal history records.

Work is more than a means to earning a paycheck; it offers purpose and structure to one's life and instills an inherent sense of self-worth and value. As such, employment is a major determinant of whether an ex-offender will be able to reintegrate into and become a productive member of society. The legislation under consideration today will create increased opportunities for former offenders to contribute to society and reduce recidivism by providing more paths to stable employment, increased earnings, meaningful work, and improved quality of life, while still allowing licensing authorities professional discretion to protect the best interests and safety of the public. With enactment of this legislation, an individual who once primarily thought of themselves as a criminal or convict would now have the opportunity to forge a new, positive identity: home health aide, cosmetologist, or plumber, among others.

With regard to the profession of social work, implementation of this law—specifically, those provisions in section 2 setting forth a process for licensing authorities to follow in instances where a criminal conviction is deemed to have a direct relationship to the profession or occupation regulated by the board—could have a direct and positive impact on the profession of social work. Some of the strongest, most passionate practitioners in the field are those who have lived experience in their field of practice—therapists who have experienced their own mental health crises; child protection workers who grew up in the child welfare system. Likewise, an individual with a 10-year-old criminal conviction for drug possession, now in long-term recovery from addiction, might seek work in the addictions field to help others who have found themselves on a similar path. Another individual who spent significant time in prison may wish to become a counselor to help and inspire other offenders to rehabilitate themselves.

It goes without saying that not every individual with a criminal background who applies for social work licensure is suited for such work, but they should not summarily be denied the ability to work in the field, particularly if they have successfully completed the rigorous educational and training requirements. Current restrictions that create roadblocks to licensure for these individuals can limit their ability to secure viable employment or seek advancement in the field and may deny otherwise highly-qualified individuals from leveraging their personal experiences for the betterment of others.

As a society, we continue to punish people for making mistakes, while at the same time erecting barriers that deny the chance to move on from those mistakes. This legislation will lower one of those barriers and offer a path to meaningful change for those struggling to overcome sins of the past.

Thank you for your time and consideration.