

SENATE BILL NO. 342
INTRODUCED BY C. SQUIRES

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT REQUIRING APPLICANTS FOR LICENSURE AS SOCIAL WORKERS AND PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS TO SUBMIT FINGERPRINTS FOR CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS PRIOR TO THE ISSUANCE OF A LICENSE; AMENDING SECTIONS 37-22-101, 37-22-301, 37-23-101, AND 37-23-202, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN APPLICABILITY DATE."

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:

Section 1. Section 37-22-101, MCA, is amended to read:

"37-22-101. Purpose. (1) The legislature finds and declares that because the profession of social work profoundly affects the lives of people of this state, it is the purpose of this chapter to provide for the common good by:

(a) ~~insuring~~ ensuring the ethical, qualified, and professional practice of social work; and

(b) instituting an effective mechanism for obtaining accurate public information regarding an applicant's criminal background:

(i) to prevent convicted criminal offenders who committed crimes relevant to working with children, the elderly, the mentally ill, or other vulnerable persons from obtaining a Montana social work license as an attempt to gain access to and perpetrate crimes against new victims; and

(ii) to protect the state from claims of negligence.

(2) This chapter and the rules promulgated under 37-22-201 set standards of qualification, education, training, and experience and will establish professional ethics for those who seek to engage in the practice of social work as licensed social workers."

Section 2. Section 37-22-301, MCA, is amended to read:

"37-22-301. License requirements -- exemptions. (1) A license applicant shall satisfactorily complete an examination prescribed by the board.

(2) Before an applicant may take the examination, the applicant shall present three letters of reference from licensed social workers, licensed clinical social workers, psychiatrists, or psychologists who have knowledge of the applicant's professional performance and shall demonstrate to the board that the applicant:

(a) has a doctorate or master's degree in social work from a program accredited by the council on social work education or approved by the board;

(b) has completed at least 24 months of supervised post master's degree work experience in psychotherapy, which included 3,000 hours of social work experience, of which at least 1,500 hours were in direct client contact, within the past 5 years; and

(c) abides by the social work ethical standards adopted under 37-22-201.

(3) An applicant who fails the examination may reapply to take the examination.

(4) An applicant is exempt from the examination requirement if the applicant satisfies the board that the applicant is licensed, certified, or registered under the laws of a state or territory of the United States that imposes substantially the same requirements as this chapter and that the applicant has passed an examination similar to that required by the board.

(5) (a) As a prerequisite to the issuance of a license, the board shall require the applicant to submit fingerprints for the purpose of fingerprint checks by the Montana department of justice and the federal bureau of investigation.

(b) The applicant shall sign a release of information to the board and is responsible to the department of justice for the payment of all fees associated with the criminal background check.

(c) Upon completion of the criminal background check, the department of justice shall forward all criminal justice information, as defined in 44-5-103, concerning the applicant that involves the conviction of a criminal offense in any jurisdiction to the board, as authorized in 44-5-303.

(d) At the conclusion of any background check required by this section, the board must receive the criminal background check report but may not receive the fingerprint card of the applicant. Upon receipt of the criminal background check report, the department of justice shall promptly destroy the fingerprint card of the applicant.

(6) If an applicant has a history of criminal convictions, then pursuant to 37-1-203, the applicant has the opportunity to demonstrate to the board that the applicant is sufficiently rehabilitated to warrant the public trust, and if the board determines that the applicant is not, the license may be denied."

Section 3. Section 37-23-101, MCA, is amended to read:

"37-23-101. Purpose. (1) The legislature finds and declares that because the profession of professional counseling profoundly affects the lives of people of this state, it is the purpose of this chapter to provide for the common good by:

(a) ensuring the ethical, qualified, and professional practice of professional counseling; and
(b) instituting an effective mechanism for obtaining accurate public information regarding an applicant's criminal background:

(i) to prevent convicted criminal offenders who committed crimes relevant to working with children, the elderly, the mentally ill, or other vulnerable persons from obtaining a Montana professional counseling license as an attempt to gain access to and perpetrate crimes against new victims; and

(ii) to protect the state from claims of negligence.

(2) This chapter and the rules promulgated by the board under 37-22-201 set standards of qualification, education, training, and experience and establish professional ethics for those who seek to engage in the practice of professional counseling as licensed professional counselors."

Section 4. Section 37-23-202, MCA, is amended to read:

"37-23-202. Licensure requirements. (1) An applicant for licensure must have satisfactorily:

(a) completed a planned graduate program of 60 semester hours, primarily counseling in nature, 6 semester hours of which were earned in an advanced counseling practicum that resulted in a graduate degree from an institution accredited to offer a graduate program in counseling;

(b) completed 3,000 hours of counseling practice supervised by a licensed professional counselor or licensed member of an allied mental health profession, at least half of which was postdegree. The applicant must have each supervisor endorse the application for licensure, attesting to the number of hours supervised.

(c) passed an examination prepared and administered by:

(i) the national board of certified counselors; or

(ii) the national academy of certified clinical mental health counselors; and

(d) completed an application.

(2) The board shall provide by rule for licensure of a person who possesses a graduate degree that consists of a minimum of 45 semester hours primarily related to counseling and that is from an institution accredited to offer a graduate program in counseling, by specifying the additional graduate credit hours necessary to fulfill the requirements of subsection (1)(a) in counseling courses in an approved program within a period of 5 years.

(3) (a) As a prerequisite to the issuance of a license, the board shall require the applicant to submit fingerprints for the purpose of fingerprint checks by the Montana department of justice and the federal bureau of investigation.

(b) The applicant shall sign a release of information to the board and is responsible to the department of justice for the payment of all fees associated with the criminal background check.

(c) Upon completion of the criminal background check, the department of justice shall forward all criminal justice information, as defined in 44-5-103, concerning the applicant that involves the conviction of a criminal offense in any jurisdiction to the board, as authorized in 44-5-303.

(d) At the conclusion of any background check required by this section, the board must receive the criminal background check report but may not receive the fingerprint card of the applicant. Upon receipt of the criminal background check report, the department of justice shall promptly destroy the fingerprint card of the applicant.

(4) If an applicant has a history of criminal convictions, then pursuant to 37-1-203, the applicant has the opportunity to demonstrate to the board that the applicant is sufficiently rehabilitated to warrant the public trust, and if the board determines that the applicant is not, the license may be denied."

NEW SECTION. Section 5. Applicability. [This act] applies to applications for licensure submitted on or after [the effective date of this act].

- END -