



# An insider's look at the licensing exams

*The proven integrity of the licensing exams lies in the capable hands of the Exam Committee*

When the three ASWB Examination Committee co-chairs rose to present their annual report to the 2014 Delegate Assembly in Boise, Idaho, the room fell silent. The work of this dedicated, all-volunteer committee of subject matter experts appointed by ASWB's president is profoundly important to all the

Clinical exam co-chair, each of whom alternated with Meyer to present a comprehensive picture of what the committee does, how it does it, and the results of their efforts in 2014. Following are highlights of their presentation.

## What is the Exam Committee?

The Exam Committee:

Reviews, edits, and approves all new items (exam questions) according to the committee's set process, which is explained below

- Ensures that all new items are linked to appropriate Knowledge, Skills, and Ability (KSA) statements and assigned to the appropriate ASWB examination (Bachelors, Masters, Clinical, Advanced Generalist)
- Evaluates pretest items (new, unscored items to be tested prior to being integrated into item banks of operational questions)
- Approves new forms (a set of exam questions) by evaluating content and quality
- Participates in passing score studies and other psychometric support services
- Contributes to policy decisions regarding the



*Exam Committee chairs Brent Meyer (GA), Stacey Owens (MD), and Greg Winkler (WI) present their annual report to the delegate assembly.*

professionals in attendance.

So, of course, their presentation began with a laugh, when Brent Meyer, Masters exam co-chair from Georgia, told all that he was the sole representative from his state so he intends to "represent my state goooood!"

The other co-chairs on the stage were Stacey Owens of Maryland, Bachelors exam co-chair, and Greg Winkler of Wisconsin,

exams and content

In 2014, there were 17 members of the Exam Committee, each selected from a pool of proficient item writers. A committee member's term of service is for one year, renewable up to three years. When selections are made each year, the choices are balanced for demographic and practice diversity. Biographical information and photos of the current committee members are published in the 2014 Examination Program Yearbook, available by request from [info@aswb.org](mailto:info@aswb.org).

The committee meets four or more times per year, two-and-a-half days per meeting. In 2014, they met in March, June, August, and October. At the meetings, the committee functions in three groups, one for each exam. Members of each group are determined at the beginning of each year. Their main task is to approve new items to be pretested.

### **What is the item review process?**

The goal during the review of new items is to ensure that the questions are clearly written and measure minimum competency in the KSAs that are relevant to current social work practice, as determined by the most recent practice analysis. There are two review processes for new items, the pair review and the group review.

During pair review, two committee members work together to review new items in hard copy. Two outcomes could ensue: 1) they could edit the item or approve it as is, then forward it for an onscreen group review, or 2) they could return the item to the consultant or writer, with

suggestions on how to revise it.

Items forwarded by the pair reviewers are projected onscreen for group review and discussion. All decisions about the items are made by consensus. This review can result in one of three outcomes: 1) the item is returned to the consultant or writer with suggestions for changes, 2) the item is edited or approved as is and moved to pretest, or 3) the item is deleted and the reason documented to inform future item writers and consultants.

The presentation by Owens, Meyer, and Winkler included fascinating example questions that illustrated the difference between an item that would be approved because it measures minimum competency and items that would not be approved. Reasons an item would not be approved include level of difficulty (too easy) or criticality to practice. The three also covered some of the minutiae behind the construction of questions, such as whether the question is focused, has more than one correct answer, is appropriate for Canada, and other stylistic elements.

Two other types of review occur during the year. Problem Item Review (PIR) and Form Review are done to evaluate the performance of pretest items as well as operational items—those that have statistics and are active, scored items on the exams.

PIR involves items that have been flagged for statistical concerns based on ongoing psychometric review of the exams. The types of discrepancy that can be seen include, for example, items that

women answer correctly more often than men, and items that high-scoring test-takers answer incorrectly but low-scoring test-takers answer correctly.

Form review focuses on the selection of a set of exam questions that will make up an exam, or form, before it is released for use at the testing centers. Form reviewers work in pairs and approve entire 150-question draft operational forms and review pretest pools for items that will be mixed in. In 2014, form reviewers met four times and approved 13 examination forms (four each for Bachelors, Masters, and Clinical, and one in Advanced Generalist), 1,950 operational items, and 1,555 pretest items.

In 2014, the ASWB Exam Committee reviewed 1,222 new items and approved 862 for pretest; the committee returned 41 items to the writer, and deleted 58 items. There were 249 items reviewed in pairs only, and 12 items were moved to another exam category. In addition to the committee members, the exam development program includes nearly 80 item writers who are coached by five item development consultants. The consultants also attend the Exam Committee item review meetings to lend their expertise.

Together, this diverse group of social workers and subject matter experts ensures that the ASWB social work examinations remain valid and reliable measures of minimum competency for use by member jurisdictions during licensing decisions.