



Exam Content

February 20, 2025

Blueprints for the 2026 competence assessments reflect significant structural modifications, minor content changes

Tags: Exam development Exams

Work on the next iteration of competence assessments for social work licensing moved forward in recent months. ASWB regularly updates its exams as part of a commitment to meeting and exceeding industry standards for the development of valid competence assessments.

In 2023, the association convened the Practice Analysis Task Force, a diverse group of volunteer social work subject matter experts. The task force contributed to the survey of social workers that formed the basis of the 2024 analysis of the practice of social work – reenvisioned as the Social Work Census. Members used input from social workers to make data-driven decisions to update the content and weighting of the blueprints for the 2026 competence assessments.

Structural and editorial updates

The changes made to the licensing exam blueprints are based on feedback from more than 25,000 social workers who participated in the practice analysis. These changes include structural and editorial modifications for comprehensiveness and relevance to current practice.

“When they met in 2023, Practice Analysis Task Force members noted that

[Privacy - Terms](#)

redundancy existed in the current blueprints,” said Carl Hokanson, LGSW, ASWB examination development director. “Based on the task force’s recommendation, the decision was made to significantly reorganize the blueprints to improve the clarity of the content outlines.”

The examination blueprints were updated from four content areas to three and were reorganized because of the similarities in the practice of social work in all categories of practice. The restructuring maintains the distinct nature of each exam and its corresponding practice category.

Another change concerned terminology. *Knowledge, skills, and abilities statements* (KSAs) were converted to *applied knowledge statements* to better reflect the purpose of the assessment to determine a social worker’s competence in applying knowledge rather than recalling information.

Minimal change to exam content

While the number of knowledge statements decreased, the new blueprints reflect the addition of emerging areas of competency identified by the practice analysis and removed very little exam content. Instead, the outlines went through a process of consolidation, allowing the new content outlines to be more easily understood by candidates as they prepare for an examination.

The practice analysis also found that the values and ethics content area was ranked as more important than it had been in previous studies. Accordingly, the 2026 blueprints emphasize this content area by consistently giving it the highest percentage of questions.

“This finding coincides with the values of social work,” said Lavina Harless, LCSW, ASWB senior director of examination services. “It is fitting that our profession’s competence assessments prioritize demonstrating an understanding of and ability to apply the values and ethics that guide us.”

Statistical comparisons of the survey responses indicated minimal differences in ratings between the United States and Canada, as has been true for all practice analyses conducted since the early 2000s. The blueprints for all four categories



of licensure exams, therefore, reflect a valid, reliable interpretation of the social work profession in both countries.

The new exam blueprints will go into effect in 2026 with the next iteration of the social work licensing competence assessments.

 [2024 Analysis of the Practice of Social Work](#)

Next step: Competence assessment standard setting

ASWB will issue a broad call to currently practicing social workers from which a diverse, representative panel of more than 75 members will be selected. This group – larger than ever before engaged by ASWB – will participate in setting the passing score for the 2026 assessments. With support from psychometricians, ASWB will conduct a standard-setting workshop. The expert panel will review anchor exams for each exam category, take the assessment, rate each item for probability that it would be answered correctly, and discuss minimum competence in the content measured. The panelists' input will then be used to compute the passing standard – the point on which pass–fail determinations are made – for the anchor exam.

The 2024 Analysis of the Practice of Social Work is also published in French for use by ASWB's francophone and bilingual member jurisdictions.

 [Analyse de la pratique du travail social 2024](#)