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Testimony to House Business and Labor Committee
Provided by: Paloma Sparks, Legislative Director
Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries

The Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) appreciates the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 2007, which would protect workers from retaliation from their employers for discussing wages amongst themselves.

In 2011, Commissioner Brad Avakian directed the Oregon Council on Civil Rights (OCCR) to study the issue of pay equality in Oregon. In 2013, the legislature passed Senate Bill 744, directing BOLI and the Council to continue to study the issue and make recommendations to the Oregon Legislature. Early in 2014, the Council produced the Pay Inequality in Oregon report. That report finds that women in Oregon still make just 79 cents for every dollar earned by a man.

Pay inequality affects women's financial stability throughout their earning lives. Women continue to take home less income, are less likely to earn raises and promotions at the same pace, earn fewer retirement benefits, and accumulate lower lifetime wealth. At the same time two-thirds of working women are the primary or co-breadwinner in their families. Pay inequality affects families across Oregon.

A significant barrier to a worker's ability to advocate for equal pay is the existence of policies prohibiting employees from discussing their wages. While it is fading from favor, some employers continue to subject employees to discipline for the simple act of talking about how much they earn. It is much harder to find out if you are being paid fairly if you can't talk to your coworkers. And if you can't find out how your pay compares to others who do the same work, you can't advocate to be paid equally.

For this reason, the Council has recommended that Oregon pass a wage transparency law. House Bill 2007 would protect workers' rights to discuss wages without fear of retaliation. This protection would not interfere with an employer's right to prohibit an employee who maintains pay records from releasing those records. This merely protects open communication among employees. The work by the Council and BOLI make it clear that this is a key to moving towards true equal pay.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2007. I would be happy to answer questions.

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