

April 6, 2015

Chair Dembrow and Members of the Senate Committee on Workforce,

My name is Ben Marsten and I have worked in the service industry for 23 years. I currently work as a bartender for a company called Aramark. I work at the Portland '5 Centers for the Performing Arts, serving thousands of Oregonians and our visitors over the last 12 years. I am also a proud member of UNITE HERE Local 8 and President of Oregon AFL-CIO Pride @ Work, which is a Queer Labor group.

Until a few years back, when my union negotiated health insurance benefits for a limited number of employees, our only way of getting affordable insurance was Oregon Health Plan. At the time, I fell into a hole between making too much to qualify for OHP, but far too little to pay for insurance out of pocket.

Since ACA has gone into effect, I qualify for OHP, including basic dental care. It has been amazing to hear my many friends in the food service and hospitality industry talking about how they are going to the doctor or dentist for the first time in years! Despite the many issues with ACA, it has truly transformed our lives.

Even though we have a union contract, those who qualified for the company plan that was negotiated in our Collective Bargaining Agreement have told me the coverage was poor and they couldn't afford it. Of the people who qualified for the company plan in 2013, only a couple of people enrolled, and at least one of them has since opted out and gone to the exchange. All of us are getting publicly subsidized health care instead, and my employer is not paying their fair share.

Our wages are also heavily subsidized by the citizens of Oregon because a substantial portion of our income comes from tips. There is no way my employer could get people qualified to provide the level of service that they expect based on the hourly wage alone. Were it not for tip income, I would be on public assistance. Either way, my employer is passing the cost on to the people of Oregon.

As an Oregonian in my industry, it is clear to me that employers are not doing enough to ensure workers have access to affordable healthcare. I believe our state can do more to correct this inequity.

SB 845 is a simple solution to ensure that employers with workers on medical public assistance are paying their fair share and not just shifting costs onto taxpayers. I strongly urge your support for this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.