

To: Oregon House Health Care Committee  
From: Athena H Phillips, LCSW  
Owner/Therapist  
Integrative Trauma Treatment Center (ITTC)  
Re: Support for HB 3427

Chair Greenlick and Members of the Health Care Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on Fair and Equitable pay for Mental Health Practitioners. My commitment to social service work began 24 years ago and continues today in my role as an owner and therapist at ITTC. We are a highly specialized organization that serves those who have been exposed to profound and continuous violence, sexual exploitation, emotional abuse, neglect, and other forms of fundamental human betrayal and harm. In this role, my passion for offering a platform for recovery provides the fuel necessary to find ways to financially sustain a company in the context of an adverse health insurance system.

Prior to the establishment of ITTC two years ago, I was in private practice for six years independently. The reimbursement rates I receive from many companies today is the same or less than when I began private practice 9 years ago. Stagnant reimbursement rates cannot sustain Mental Health Practitioners; we are not exempt from the rising cost of living that the rest of the populous experiences. In any other industry, cutting the salaries of workers by even 5% on a regular basis (not to mention 30%) would be unacceptable. Naturally the workforce of such an industry would shrink, particularly if workers also had to endure adverse conditions that cost additional money to obtain payment.

Approximately .08% of our income at ITTC goes to a billing company that specializes in collecting payment from insurance companies. This expense is the most significant of all of our costs and is 30% higher than what it costs to house all my practitioners. This is in contrast with the 75.00 per session that three major insurance companies have been reimbursing for a 50 minute session for the past 9 years. Billing companies are necessary due to the obvious incentive insurance companies have to complicate this process and adds another layer of pressure for practitioners to raise their prices and to only work on an out-of-network basis (which is more costly for everyone).

Speaking concretely, as a business owner, I clearly cannot afford to continue to serve people at 75.00 per service hour, which will force me to drop contracts who reimburse poorly or who cut our rates. Naturally the effect is that consumers who work with those companies will have higher out-of-pocket costs, which is prohibitive for many people. ITTC opened two years ago; all of my practitioners have a waiting list and my prescriber is booked out through June. Demand for our services is clearly not an issue, however accessibility is.

Given the population served in my group, we work with high levels of acute suicidality and far less frequently homicidality. Negotiating safety with our clients is a basic part of

our treatment; on average I am assessing for acuity with at least one of my clients twice a month, however I have hospitalized one person in the past 3 years. Those who do not have access to mental health care who are suicidal or homicidal utilize the emergency room and psychiatric beds, which are in very short supply. I have had a lot of success in partnering with my clients to avoid hospitalization and am well aware of the cost-saving benefits of my work.

I am writing to express my general support for HB 3427, with the exception of two concerns:

1. It allows for decreases in reimbursement. A perfect bill would require standard of living pay increases and disallow cuts in reimbursement.
2. It incentivizes an overall depression of reimbursement for mental health services by tying types of practitioners pay to the highest tier (psychiatry). A provision that disallows decreasing reimbursement to higher tiers would be necessary to ensure the integrity behind the intent of the bill.

I propose that at minimum, an addendum to the be bill written that expressly prohibits decreasing reimbursement for psychiatry and ideally requiring cost of living increases.

I thank you again for the opportunity to speak on behalf of both Mental Health Practitioners and those consumers who utilize our services.

Sincerely,

Athena H Phillips, LCSW  
Owner/Therapist  
Integrative Trauma Treatment Center (ITTC)