

March 11, 2019

Chair Wagner and Senators:

My name is Shirlee Geiger. In 2006, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the time I was teaching at both Portland State University and Portland Community College. My total teaching load was about twice the amount of teaching expected of tenured professors at PSU and approximately 1.25 of a full-time load at PCC.

I was paying for an individual health insurance policy at the time. Both PCC and PSU faculty unions paid part of my monthly insurance premium -- adding up to about half the cost. But because the individual policy was priced so high, my policy still was considered “catastrophic” insurance only.

My cancer treatment included surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation during two separate calendar years. This meant I had two very large bills to pay before the insurance started to pick up costs. I continued to teach my more-than-full-time load at PSU and PCC through my treatments, since I had both my regular bills and the new large medical bills to pay.

At the end of my radiation and chemotherapy, my oncologist advised following up with five years of treatment with an estrogen blocker called Arimidex, which had no generic version. Paying for it would have been hundreds of dollars each month. I couldn’t afford the treatment most likely to keep me well.

In 2008, PCC’s bargaining team secured health care benefits for “part-time” faculty like me, and I qualified. Thanks to the magic of a large insurance pool -- I received much better coverage at less cost. At that point, I was able to start taking the Arimidex drug my doctors had recommended.

Today, 13 years later, I am cancer free. I believe that qualifying for health insurance at group rates may be why I can still say that I am a “cancer survivor.”

When I was teaching through my chemotherapy, it was hard to understand why I had to pay so much more for such inferior health insurance. Senate Bill 852 would be a wonderful way to address that strange and unfair disparity for part-time faculty members across Oregon.

Sincerely,

Shirlee Geiger, Part-time Instructor, Philosophy  
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