



Service Employees International Union – Oregon State Council
6401 SE Foster ▪ Portland, OR 97206

March 3, 2021

Dear Chair Sanchez and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is LaShanda Friedrich, and I am a member of SEIU 503. I have worked for the Oregon Health Authority for nearly ten years in the Public Health Division, first in Adolescent and School Health and currently in Maternal and Child Health. I am here to speak in support of HB 2949.

I testify as a black woman who has personal experience seeking culturally-relevant mental health care as well as from my perspective as a Public Health professional. This influences my testimony.

In the past few years, my journey through the mental health landscape has been fraught with roadblocks, mainly manifesting themselves as lack of access to culturally-relevant care. Back in May 2018, I began working with a great therapist through OHSU Avel Gordly Center for Healing. This was covered in-network by my insurance provider, Kaiser Permanente. Finding a therapist that has a similar background, therefore understanding my lived experience and able to tailor my mental health treatment plan accordingly, is not easy anywhere, much less Portland. In September 2018, she notified me she was starting her own practice and would not be in-network for Kaiser. She helped me fill out forms to seek an out-of-network exemption that I submitted to a panel of Kaiser doctors who subsequently refused to cover my sessions with her. I could not pay for my bi-weekly sessions out of pocket, so I just went without care. Within 6 months, I was in inpatient care at Kaiser Permanente's Brookside Center. My mental health had deteriorated. In both the inpatient and outpatient settings, I found that it was nearly impossible to find Black female mental health professionals that were either employed by Kaiser or in Kaiser's network. When I was able to find one, the wait list often exceeded 6 months.

As a Public Health advocate and professional, I had trouble navigating complex systems in order to get the care I deserved. I had to get the union and Kaiser mental health leadership involved over the course of several months. Imagine this journey for someone who doesn't have the same systematic support. Many fall through the cracks and are left untreated. I speak for them today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded mental health needs. Many will come out the pandemic with trauma that will manifest itself for years to come. Oregon being proactive to increase capacity in the mental health workforce is one of the best

investments it will ever make for the well-being of her residents and to reduce health disparities.

HB 2949 outlines a vision and strategies to address these significant challenges and invest resources that will help people of color get the quality mental health care they need. The policies included in HB 2949 will help attract people of color to careers in mental health and ensure that they are fiscally supported to stay in the profession.

I ask that you support HB 2949.