



**Monday, April 5, 2021**

**Members of the House Health Care Committee  
Oregon State Capitol Building  
900 Court St NE  
Salem, OR 97301**

**RE: Written comments of support for HB 3353**

**Chair Prusak, Vice Chair Salinas, Vice Chair Hayden and House Health Care Committee members,**

The Oregon Council for Behavioral Health would like to express our support HB 3353 or the Oregon Waiver Bill.

Oregon's behavioral healthcare (substance use disorder and mental health) system has been under stress for decades and these issues have been rapidly compounded in the current pandemic. Longstanding behavioral health professional shortages at all level of education, diversity, and service type are dramatically intensified as our members posted positions across the state remain unfilled without application for weeks on end.

The behavioral healthcare system suffers from "wage compressions" in large part due to low rates of reimbursement from the federal government for behavioral health providers. This chronic low rate of reimbursement makes it difficult to create competitive employment packages that retain and recruit BH professionals into the field. Without staff access to services is reduced, hindering the ability to scale diverse and equitable care. The current rigid payor physical health budgeting and billing system used in Medicaid makes it extremely hard for payors to apply needed payment innovation to support their local provider networks to help address these staffing shortages, access struggles and program scaling needs particularly for diverse communities. **For quality diverse BH services to make a population level impact a new creative funding mechanism is critical.** And while some CCOs have made investment to help with integration of behavioral health these are often one-time grants making it hard to make sustained changes to the system.

These grantmaking strategies often used in the BH sector contribute to a cycle of program opening and closure which has negative impacts on Oregonians access and the moral of the workforce.

HB 3353 creates flexibility for the Medicaid system that could both be used to help increase the wage floor for behavior health providers and fund the build of integrated infrastructure that could help Behavioral Healthcare provider agencies in creating equitable access to care. This would also help support and expand efforts to recruit and retain BH professionals can provide cultural and linguistical skilled services to help patients from underserved populations across the state.

This payor flexibility could also be used to help our BH agency members by addressing other vital needs of our patients. People needing behavior healthcare treatments often have other non-medical health needs that go well beyond the traditional medical billing or even what is deemed “appropriate” flexible services. This flexibility can not only help our behavioral health patients in a more holistic system, but it can also help create community supports to keep patients stable with strong aftercare and social determinate supports.

This flexibility is even more important now because of the one-two punch of COVID and natural disasters, sadly now including a fire season and winter storms. According to surveys we are seeing significant increasing fragility in the Behavioral Healthcare system in a noticeably short time frame. The flexibility called for inside the waiver concept will be vital for addressing the behavioral healthcare need that we are just beginning to witness and is predicted through decades of research on disaster impacts on communities.

We understand this not a panacea. There is much work for all of us to do improve the health care delivery system. But what this does do is help inch the Oregon Health Plan closer to “true” global budget which can help address our behavioral help provider shortages, sustainability fund innovative new programs in and outside of treatment, and diversify our behavioral health workforce to equitably serve Oregonians on their journey to health and wellness.

Thank you for taking the time to read our written testimony.

Sincerely,

Oregon Council for Behavioral Health

## **About the Oregon Council for Behavioral Health**

OCBH's focus is to promote, develop, and maintain the highest quality and equitable access to community programs and services for the treatment of problems related to behavioral health and to promote the recovery of Oregonians with substance use disorder and/or mental health concerns. OCBH today has over 50 members, employing over 8,000 Oregonians and serving several hundred thousand Oregonians annually on their journey to improved health and recovery.