



**Service Employees International Union – Oregon State Council**

6401 SE Foster ▪ Portland, OR 97206

**To:** Joint Ways & Means Subcommittee on Human Services

**On:** February 9, 2021

**Re:** House Bill 5024, Budget for the Oregon Health Authority (Public Health Division)

Dear Co-Chairs Nosse and Lieber, members of the Committee,

My name is Courtney Graham, and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of SEIU Oregon State Council. SEIU is an 85,000 member union in Oregon and SW Washington and a 2 million member union nationally. Our mission is to improve the lives of working families. In Oregon we represent many of the workers who have been on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, including care workers, hospital workers, public workers, airport workers, and the list goes on.

I write today to support a request to increase the funding for public health modernization included in the Governor's Recommended Budget (GRB) from \$30 million to \$68.9 million, the amount originally included in OHA's Agency Request Budget (ARB).

While there were compelling reasons to invest in ongoing public health modernization pre-COVID-19, our state's experience with the pandemic has made the need even clearer. OHA's own narrative says, "COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color, low wage workers and individuals in congregate settings like correctional facilities and long-term care facilities."

SEIU members working in congregate care facilities have seen numerous COVID outbreaks that impacted both patients and staff, due to insufficient oversight and a lack of adequate PPE, among other factors. These facilities in Oregon account for more than half of the deaths tragically caused by COVID-19. This is just one example of why the work that Oregon's Public Health Division and Local Public Health Authorities do is so critical, and why we need to continue to improve upon and invest in their work - not underfund it.

The experience of our members and their families during this pandemic has borne this out in so many profoundly harmful ways that demand we do better now and in the future to protect the health of our communities - whether from future pandemics, the growing impact of wildfires on our collective health, or the ongoing impacts of systemic and structural racism. It seems that every year, OHA and LPHA's are tasked with a growing list of chronic and systemic issues, while at the same time receiving budgets that are not adequate to meet the need. I heard from a member just the other day who works in Public Health, and described the whiplash of being moved from crisis-to-crisis throughout the last year, and the drain it's had on her personally and her colleagues at the Department. It's time to invest in the work at a level that meets the need.

Oregon's public health infrastructure is a critical part of our state's overall resiliency infrastructure. As the Legislature considers how to improve this infrastructure and our ability to respond to future emergencies, this investment in public health modernization should be a key part of the conversation.