



Date February 11, 2021

TO: The Honorable Julie Fahey, Chair  
House Committee on Housing

FROM: Gabriela Goldfarb, Environmental Public Health Section Manager  
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SUBJECT: HB 2842, Establishment of a Healthy Homes Program

Chair Fahey and members of the committee, I am Gabriela Goldfarb, Environmental Public Health Section Manager in the Public Health Division of the Oregon Health Authority. For the record, OHA has no position on this bill, but has worked with Representative Pam Marsh to provide technical information.

This bill establishes a Healthy Homes Program within OHA to provide financial assistance for repair, rehabilitation and health and safety upgrades to residential housing occupied by members of low income and environmental justice communities. It also establishes a Healthy Homes Repair Fund and directs OHA to award grants from the Fund to local government, non-profit organizations, Oregon federally-recognized tribes and nonprofit housing assistance programs to in turn provide financial assistance to low income households to repair and rehabilitate dwellings.

The bill establishes an Interagency Task Force on Healthy Homes consisting of OHA, Housing and Community Services Department and the Department of Environmental Quality to consult with stakeholders in identifying barriers to healthy homes and developing strategies to overcome those barriers and leverage resources to advance health home goals.

The connection between housing and health is well established. Hazardous conditions in homes negatively impact the health and safety of residents. Some of these hazards we can see, such as mold, dust, pests, and lead-based paint. Some are unseen, such as electrical hazards, carbon monoxide, radon and other carcinogens. A Healthy Homes approach is holistic and comprehensive and involves public health, community organizations and housing and energy efficiency professionals with the training and tools necessary to

address the broad range of housing deficiencies and hazards associated with unhealthy and unsafe homes.

The association of asthma and exposure to poor indoor air quality is a prime example of how substandard housing can impact health. When a person has asthma, exposure to poor indoor air quality, such as smoke from uncertified wood stoves, as well as mold and chemical irritants can trigger asthma attacks. In Oregon, people with lower incomes and communities of color experience disproportionate rates of asthma, with prevalence 70% higher among those on the Oregon Health Plan (OHP) than the general population in the state. Asthma-related hospitalizations for OHP members is 80% higher than for people with other insurance plans. Treating asthma in an emergency department setting is expensive. In 2019, 53% of asthma emergency department visits were for OHP patients at a cost to the state of nearly \$15.8 million.<sup>i</sup> Improving housing conditions can prevent asthma attacks, reduce medical costs and increase equitable health outcomes.

OHA currently has modest federal grants that support public awareness and outreach programs related to radon and lead-based paint hazards. OHA also has limited resources to address environmental hazards around homes, in August of last year our federal grant supporting our domestic well safety program was not renewed, and we have only one position to investigate multi-family pesticide exposures incidents. This bill would require OHA to address multiple housing deficiencies that affect health and safety and convene and coordinate governmental and non-governmental environmental health, housing, and energy efficiency professionals and work with communities to carry out a Healthy Homes program.

I'm available as a resource to the committee if there are any questions or concerns. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue.

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<sup>i</sup> Oregon Health Authority Hospital Reporting Program (2020). Oregon Emergency Department Data. Data accessed 08/31/2020. Portland, OR: Oregon Health Authority.