

Chair Marsh, Vice-Chair Helm, Vice-Chair Brock Smith, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 2475.

As a primary care physician, I worked at Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, a migrant and community health center in Washington and Yamhill Counties. Now retired, I am a member of Oregon Physician's for Responsibility's Healthy Climate Action Team. I strongly support House Bill 2475 which will help Oregon families afford their energy bills through lower rates for residential ratepayers with lower incomes from both a health and a justice perspective.

Being able to afford to heat and cool one's home is critical to one's health and well-being. This is especially true now in the time COVID-19 when people are spending more time in their homes. Now with people, especially children, spending more time at home, not having a warm environment makes learning difficult if not impossible. Children and the elderly have especially high health risks. For example, cold and stress are triggers for asthma and excessive heat may worsen heart disease. Having to live in an environment that is either too cold or too hot is extremely stressful and worsens both mental and physical health for all of us. Not being able to purchase healthy foods and/or medicines often causes those with chronic illnesses to seek expensive emergency medical care. In addition, some people are completely dependent upon electronic medical devices or refrigeration of life-saving medications to maintain their health.

We know that the cost of housing is a significant reason for so many Oregonians being homeless. The additional burden of utility bills, consuming a much higher percentage of income for low income families and individuals, makes it even more difficult to stay housed. Those most affected are rural Oregonians and the Black Indigenous and People Of Color community, especially in our cities. Low income workers are often essential workers, living and working in settings where they are more likely to get COVID-19. The cost of their utility bills leaves them having to make the choice to buy food or medicine or heat their apartments. People may take out costly pay-day loans or they may use unsafe heating sources such as ovens and space-heaters.

The lack of energy affordability not only worsens physical and mental health, it disproportionately affects our most vulnerable communities. Passing House Bill 2475 would go a long way toward a just and equitable solution for energy affordability, especially for rural Oregonians and our Black Indigenous People Of Color communities.