



## **Testimony in Support of House Bill 2949**

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House Committee on Behavioral Health

Russell Lum

Good afternoon Chair Sanchez, Vice Chairs Moore-Green and Nosse, and members of the committee. My name is Russell Lum and I am a political organizer for Oregon Nurses Association. We represent over 15,000 nurses — including RNs and advanced practice nurses — and allied health workers. Oregon Nurses Association and the Nurse Practitioners of Oregon support HB 2949 because it will significantly lower the barriers that prevent Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) mental health care professionals from entering and thriving in their field. ONA is firmly committed to patients having options for health care providers that are approachable and accessible, often meaning, relevant from lenses of culture, ethnicity, and language. ONA is also firmly committed to undoing racism in the health system. The passage of HB 2949 furthers both goals.

Only one in five mental health professionals in the state of Oregon are BIPOC. This low figure makes it difficult for BIPOC patients to have BIPOC care providers. Measures of mental health of Oregon's people of color fare far worse than those of their white neighbors, and the availability of BIPOC clinicians is pivotal here. Patients of color are less likely to seek professional mental health services, are less likely to continue with treatment once it is begun, and are more likely to endure severe health consequences from stress and depression. These realities compound in our state where BIPOC community members are already likelier to suffer from isolation, marginalization, and interpersonal racism.

HB 2949 addresses some of the barriers created by systemic racism that have produced the lack of BIPOC mental and behavioral health practitioners in the first place. High education costs, low salaries, and the steep expense of opening a private practice make it more difficult for clinicians of color to succeed in their field, and to be accessible to patients. Retention of BIPOC providers within the mental health workforce is made more difficult when younger practitioners do not find mentors of color, whom they can use as a resource in many respects, not least being someone with whom they can process their own experiences of racism in the field.

As you know, Oregon is one of the worst states in the nation in mental health care infrastructure. HB 2949 and similar efforts are needed to raise the standard of care Oregonians receive and improve the experience of patients for whom health and opportunity are already most elusive. Oregon nurses urge you to rise to the challenge with a crucial step in passing HB 2949.