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Governor



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Testimony in support, HB 2949
House Committee on Behavioral Health
Wednesday, March 3, 2021, 8 am

Chair Rep. Sanchez, Vice-Chair Rep. Moore-Green, Vice Chair Rep. Nosse, and Representatives Lively, Morgan, Reynolds, Salinas, Sollman, and Wright:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak before you, as it is a very humbling experience for me. For the record, I am Natasha Haunsperger, a Commissioner with the Oregon Commission for Women (OCFW), and in my other role, I'm also a Police Officer with the Portland Police bureau. I applied for appointment to the OCFW because of their active commitment to public policy and its intersection with justice-involved women, aware of the bills they have supported and helped write to keep women safe and free of their abusers.

My testimonial today focuses primarily on addressing mental health using the lens of women, gender advocacy, and equity, as it is the sum of my work with women impacted by the criminal justice system. They are often victims of human trafficking and intimate partner violence. Often, they are impacted by prolonged and unaddressed abuse and who face many challenges in navigating and accessing mental health resource as a part of their recovery and empowerment. In March it is the perfect time for us to acknowledge, during Women's History Month, the role these individuals once played in our communities. Mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, and BFFs, the toll of their trauma and lack of access to effective mental health is a price they have paid, and the place of Mental Health in their long road back from incarceration is still unattainable for many.

I have been a police officer for almost fifteen years, serving my Portland community. I have had the honor and privilege of working closely with community partners, faith, and civic leaders representing diverse and multi-ethnic, and cultural communities of immigrants and refugees. As a result of this unique professional experience, I became more mindful, considerate, and understanding of the less recognized, in many instances, hidden mental health-related barriers and challenges that many women, especially justice impacted and immigrant and refugee women, are facing daily.

I strongly believe that the passage and implementation of this House Bill 2949 would duly recognize a collective and societal need to identify the existing structural and institutional barriers many justice-impacted women encounter as they transition from the jail/prison systems into the community. In my experience interacting with female inmates, I learned that they suffer

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from a host of underlying mental health issues that, if not addressed long-term, will only augment their barriers when transitioning into the community.

In addition, in 2017, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released a comprehensive [study on the mental health issues in the U.S. prison environment](#). The study revealed that female inmates experience mental health-related issues at a 60 percent higher rate compared to male inmates – interpreting this study is not only indicative of systemic gender inequities and disparities but also highlighting the fact that these women continue to face additional barriers caused by unaddressed trauma during their reintegration period.

My message today is that transition is not an easy one for many socio-economic groups, and in some instances, cultural barriers and institutional limitations inhibit success and can subject women to further harm, victimization, and spiraling into re-offending and alienation of these women from our communities. I strongly believe that funding culturally and gender-specific programs and preventative strategies to addressing mental health in our state, as outlined in this Bill, would create an inclusive and equitable mental health infrastructure.

HB 2949 would allow the above mentioned demographic of women to be involved and given a platform to share their perspectives, participate in meaningful conversation, and creation of a holistic yet culturally tailored approach to addressing:

- Challenges and opportunities involving justice-impacted women
- Untreated and hidden trauma caused by war conflict that many immigrants and refugee women suppress in their best effort to integrate into our society and community
- Complex needs and barriers female victims and survivors of intimate partner violence and human trafficking struggle with daily
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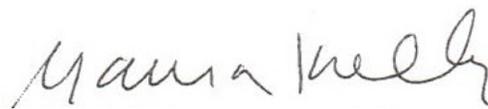
The Bill also aims to engage BIPOC women by incorporating their authentic voices in needed professions, which will in turn raise public awareness and demonstrate their skills coupled with lived experiences helping justice-involved women to recover their own places in community. It is rare to consider a Mental Health bill as a driver in the process of justice, public health, and public policy reforms, but HB 2949 is such a one. I believe it would foster a thriving environment within which justice-impacted women, immigrant, and refugee women, providing the opportunity for not only self-empowerment but to advocate for their communities' mental health needs.

The Oregon Commission for Women has taken on a number of gender equity issues and justice involvement issues for women over the past years, and I thank them and the House Committee on Behavioral Health for the honor of speaking in support of HB 2949 today. We deeply appreciate your positive consideration for this bill.

Sincerely,



Natasha Haunsperger, OCFW Commissioner



Dr. Maura Kelly, OCFW Chair