

5 April 2021  
House Committee on Behavioral Health

Ref: HB 2949

Chair Sanchez, Vice-Chairs Moore-Green and Nosse, and Committee Members:

Thank you for your consideration of HB 2949. This important piece of legislation seeks to improve inclusion of BIPOC people in the mental health workforce, which in turn would improve cultural competency and access to care for Oregon's BIPOC communities.

We speak in support of this bill on behalf of YouthLine's Legislative Committee. YouthLine is a peer to peer crisis and support line. As teen volunteers who speak to other teens around the state, we understand the struggles that young Oregonians face in accessing mental health care. Barriers to care are especially difficult for some BIPOC contacts who report that they do not see themselves represented in Oregon's mental health workforce. In fact, only 20% of Oregonian mental health professionals identify as Black, Indigenous or people of color. As things are now, the amount of BIPOC people in the mental health workforce is not proportional to Oregon's large BIPOC population.

It can be a difficult process for anyone to reach out for mental health care. However, it can be even more discouraging when an individual does not trust that mental health care professionals will be able to understand or relate to them. Some of our contacts have found this gap in understanding isolating and frustrating. BIPOC patients are less likely to search for mental health services, and are also less likely to continue with treatment once they have started. Representation of BIPOC communities could help to alleviate some of the stigma that BIPOC people face in reaching out for help. Relatability would improve trust between individuals and mental health care professionals, and allow BIPOC people to be understood in a way that could not be achieved by a professional who did not share lived experience of the same identity. Evidence shows that patients receive improved care when the workforce that serves them is more diverse. This is especially important for mental health care, where patients need to feel safe and understood in order to open up or reach out.

HB 2949 would also encourage more BIPOC young people to enter the mental health workforce. BIPOC youth are more likely to face educational and financial barriers that would prevent or discourage them from going into a field like mental health. These youth have valuable perspectives that may otherwise go unheard.

If this bill passes, people like our contacts would be more likely to see mental health professionals as people who will understand them and their experiences if they choose to reach out. Those who do seek out help will receive improved support. Young people who may not have seen mental health professions as a possible career would be empowered to explore that option and offer valuable contributions and perspectives to the field. We encourage this committee to consider all the good that this bill could do for the state, and in particular for its BIPOC communities.

Respectfully,

YouthLine Volunteer Legislative Committee