

5 April 2021
House Committee on Behavioral Health

Ref: HB 2949

Chair Tawna Sanchez , Vice-Chairs, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your consideration of HB 2949. My name is Aishwarya Grandhe. I am a senior at Sunset High School, and I volunteer at Oregon Youthline, a teen to teen crisis line open daily focused on supporting youth in crisis by creating safety and self-care plans. Teens who contact us often have mental health concerns, thoughts of suicide, or self-injury. Several common concerns I've heard from contacts are cultural stigma and a lack of mental health awareness in BIPOC households. Some teenagers have parents who don't fully understand what their children are going through due to a lack of understanding and cultural stigma. When thinking of possible support systems like a counselor or therapist, many contacts often respond that these medical professionals won't understand.

Some contacts also don't feel comfortable reaching out to a mental health professional due to unhelpful interactions with their school counselor who doesn't understand their cultural background. Oregon is consistently ranked among the worst regarding mental health care access, and fewer than one in five mental healthcare providers are people of color. This problem goes deeper than just a lack of mental healthcare providers. Diversity helps ensure that whatever patient walks through the door, they are provided support that can better serve their individual needs. The lack of diversity can also make it more intimidating for patients to seek medical care, resulting in more harm. People from different cultures and backgrounds may also perceive treatment options differently. Cultural differences can also influence coping mechanisms and support systems that work.

As a person of color myself, this is something I can relate to. I hardly ever see diversity in healthcare and rarely see it specifically in mental healthcare. This influences my own decisions on whether I can connect with a counselor or therapist who doesn't fully understand what I might be going through. This means that the lack of diversity in mental healthcare can also affect help-seeking behavior. Diversity in mental healthcare starts early on in medical schools. Diverse classrooms can benefit everyone with more broadened perspectives. It can improve learning outcomes, even improve social skills, empathy, and racial understanding.

This is where this bill comes in. This measure provides us with a unique opportunity to support BIPOC individuals and their journey into mental healthcare. HB 2949 would establish a beneficial program that ensures all backgrounds, ethnicities, and perspectives are represented in the mental healthcare field. This bill provides the opportunity to ensure that patients receive the best possible care through various medical providers. Representation in healthcare matters and this measure can be significant in improving patient care for everyone.

Respectfully,

Aishwarya Grandhe

YouthLine Volunteer Equity Committee