

Senate Committee on Health Care
Testimony in Support of SB 1554

February 2, 2022

Chair Patterson, Vice-Chair Kennemer, and Senators Beyer,
Linthicum, and Manning,

My name is Mariotta Gary-Smith, and I currently serve as
the Chair of the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs. I am
submitting this written testimony in support of SB 1554:
COVID-19 After Action Report.

1. The Commission on Black Affairs works toward
economic, social, political, and legal equity for Black
Oregonians. We do this through advocacy, public policy
research, leadership development, and partnerships.

2. In our statutory role of bringing equity focus and community voice into Oregon policy
making, the OCBA strongly supports SB 1554.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed how the world functions and operates. Many
Oregonians will be impacted by the ripple effects of this unprecedented experience. There
are effects and impacts on communities and their members that will not be known for years.
We know that marginalized and underrepresented communities have borne the brunt of the
negative externalities of this COVID-19 environment.

As a long time equity practitioner and strategist, including my current position at one of the
CCOs (coordinated care organization) in the state, I have lived and educational experience
into why research and assessments are key parts of understanding change and how to make

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improvements. For the last five years, this body of elected representatives has been part of the movement to modernize the public health system(s). To make sure that Oregon residents are reaping the benefits of this modernization process, and to identify areas of improvement and implement necessary changes, it's imperative to examine, assess, and review the responses from state and local health agencies to COVID-19 as part of the Pandemic After Action Study and Report.

This pandemic exposed what many of my colleagues and accomplices who are equity practitioners have known: Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x and other communities of color have suffered significant losses as a result of COVID-19. The health care system has been taxed to the limit, and those who work in this profession – from doctors to nurses to case management counselors to front office staff who are the first contact point for patients seeking care – all of these folks have struggled with the ways that the health care system and its policies have impacted which and how people received care during this significant moment.

A review of the pandemic and its impacts would allow growth edges to be exposed, where the areas of improvements exist, and make strong recommendations for change. It would also offer the opportunity to understand important learnings and share them among multiple municipalities for better engagement and outcomes. There will be a chance to address coordination efforts across health agencies and organizations, resources management and distribution, public health messaging and mandates, and health equity outcomes.

The lived experiences of those who have worked inside the pandemic as front-line workers, medical professional staff, service industry workers, and others can certainly tell their truths about how the pandemic has forever changed their lives. However, we also know that research and data help support the common knowledge that many of us already understand.

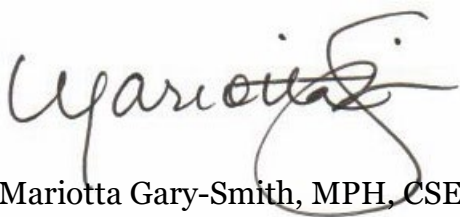


Finally, as the pandemic continues into its third year, this will not be the last challenge that the public health sector will encounter. There is a history of this state underfunding public health. Public health workers have risen to the task utilizing the limited resources provided to them. This study will create a great opportunity to justly support public health investments for the greater good – and not just the bottom line. I am of the mind that we all are accountable to our communities – chosen and adjacent – to do what is needed in this moment. And this is the chance to do something meaningfully, with a shared, iterative, and honest understanding to learn and do better.

We must be innovative in the way we as a society treat our fellow residents, especially in a time like this. The Oregon Commission on Black Affairs understands the challenges with a project like this – and I, for one, feel that SB 1554 starts the process for us to be proactive and to honor the words that many representatives have said – to change the way that the health system takes care of its patients, members, and communities.

The Oregon Commission on Black Affairs urges your support of SB 1554.

Sincerely,



Mariotta Gary-Smith, MPH, CSE
Chair of OCBA

