lines for life
Preventing Substance Abuse & Suicide

MEMORANDUM

TO: THE HONORABLE ROB NOSSE, CHAIR
THE HONORABLE RAQUEL MOORE-GREEN, VICE-CHAIR
THE HONORABLE LISA REYNOLDS, VICE-CHAIR
MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE COMMITEE ON BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

FR: DWIGHT C. HOLTON
LINES FOR LIFE

RE: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 4004

DT: February 3, 2022

Chair Nosse, Vice Chair Moore-Green, Vice Chair Reynolds:

I write on behalf of Lines for Life and the 225 caring, compassionate people who work for us to meet our mission of preventing substance abuse and suicide and promoting mental wellness.

Our people, our team members, are our greatest asset at Lines for Life. The people I work with have one of the toughest jobs in the world: reaching people on their very worst day, and helping them find a way forward – find hope to keep on going. Day in and day out, on our prevention team as well as in the crisis call center, Lines for Life staff connect with and support people in crisis. As our longtime call counselor Debbie Diedrickson likes to say, our path is to share the experience of people in crisis – to get into the mud with them, if that's where they are – and to help them find a way out.

It is incredibly rewarding work, to be sure. People work here because they love this mission and this organization.

But it is also incredibly grueling work. Our team faces the constant reality of referred trauma – the pain and anguish that come with exposing yourself to the often brutal realities faced by the people we support.

The COVID crisis has added a new dimension of challenge to the work: whereas in the past a call counselor might occasionally take a call or crisis text that triggered personal experience of trauma, each and everyone of our team members has had to endure their own struggles around coping with COVID. That means that every time we talked to someone in crisis whose circumstances are driven by COVID, we are asking our call counselors to again confront their own anguish and challenge from COVID.

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Our team members often do this work while laboring under the crushing weight of student loan debt. A typical master level provider at Lines for Life is 35 years old, has a master's in social work or counseling, and carries a student loan debt balance of $90,000, resulting in monthly payments of $500/month (post-tax, of course). It is brutal – and leads many to ask why they should enter the field when they can find a job that pays similarly in a field like hospitality – but comes with none of the debt.

Add to these challenges the background of the Great Resignation, and the dearth of new behavioral health providers entering the field, and you have a recipe for a behavioral workforce crisis.

We have seen this play out in our efforts to keep pace with hiring – especially as we have grown to meet increased need for crisis intervention and mental health and addiction prevention services.

In the first six months of 2021, we hired 36 crisis intervention specialists at Lines for Life. But during that same time, we promoted 10 in-house to new jobs, and another 20 left Lines for Life – some to return to school, some for other employment, some leaving the workforce altogether. The result of the 36 hires, and all the recruitment and retraining and investment that required, was a net of 6 additional CIS to help us meet the growing need.

At Lines for Life, we are working hard for creative (and traditional) steps to support retention, as well as make us more attractive to new employees. We established a $20/hour minimum wage back in 2019. We have raised salaries nearly 30% in the past 3 years alone. We have adjusted and improved our health benefits.

But even with these traditional steps, we are still caught in a vice of hiring and retention. We are eager to explore creative new initiatives, and we are looking at a number of ideas, including student loan support, technical support for our employees who maintain private practice, sabbaticals, opportunities for professional development, supervision for licensure, and many others. We plan to work with the team to identify the initiatives they want to prioritize – because an employee-centric approach will be central to success.

We urge you to adopt HB 4004 to authorize the Oregon Health Authority to become a partner in our efforts to support our workforce, with meaningful support for the kind of creative, employee-centric incentives and initiatives that will help us recruit and retain the essential workforce we need to meet our vital mission: preventing substance abuse and suicide and promoting mental wellness.

I'll conclude where I started: our employees at Lines for Life are our most important asset—they are the lifeblood of the organization and essential to our mission. We urge you to adopt HB 4004 to help us provide the kind of support our team needs to get the job done.

Respectfully submitted,

Douglas C. Holton

Chief Executive Officer