HB 4004 BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WORKFORCE INVESTMENT FOR SYSTEM STABILIZATION

OREGON'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEM IS IN CRISIS

Vacancies in the public behavioral health system range from 20–50% of the workforce reducing access to life-saving care for community members in need. Due to low wages, significant administrative burden and burn-out from the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations contracted to provide behavioral health services are on the brink of closure and are without immediate support. Several providers have reduced their capacity or closed their doors. Others are in jeopardy of cutting services.

The 2021 legislative session resulted in unprecedented investments in behavioral health to diversify the workforce and transform our system. However, those investments require restructuring the system, and thus are scheduled to be released over the next several years. Few of these dollars have made their way to providers so far. While we wait, the system is in desperate need of immediate assistance to bridge to these longer-term investments and solutions.

HB 4004

- Establishes a grant program available to providers of behavioral health services across OHA, DHS, and OYA (including youth and adult services, both residential and outpatient)
- Dictates that the the grant is to be allocated to providers that primarily serve Oregon's publicly funded system and will be proportionate to each providers' share of total BH workforce costs (i.e. if a provider's workforce costs are 0.5% of the total BH workforce costs, they will receive 0.5% of the grant fund)
- Requires that each provider must:
  - Spend at least 75% of their grant directly on compensation; the other 25% may be spent on other workforce retention efforts (like working condition improvements)
  - Report back to the agency on the outcomes of their investments
- The bill also provides OHA the funding to sustain a pool of nurses and behavioral health professionals available to providers when they are in dire need (currently this pool is paid for by emergency FEMA funds that are set to expire shortly)

IMPACT

Examples of how providers would use this grant

- Temporary increase wages for their workforce
- Offer a substantial retention bonus to a qualified mental health professional (QMHP) or nurse considering leaving
- Provide payments to their outpatient workforce (similar to the $2,000 stipend that went out to residential and crisis workers earlier this year)
- Improve working conditions for current employees, including offering more scheduling flexibility

LONG-TERM SOLUTION

Develop and implement new BH rates that cover costs and professional wages for staff. According to OCBH's recent survey of providers, **an average wage increase of $4/hour would be needed to retain the current workforce** and recruit for vacant positions. Advocates are working with partners on a strategy for a sustainable rate increase in the future.

Behavioral health providers are not alone in this workforce crisis, however the acuity of the crisis in the behavioral health system predates the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only exacerbated the long-standing workforce gap created by significant inequities in pay and administrative burden between the behavioral health and physical health care systems.

Oregon relies on these providers to deliver mental health and substance use disorder services to the people in Oregon who need it most. By passing HB 4004 this session, the State can help stabilize our system and ensure Oregonians can access the services they need.

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