

In-Person Testimony for HB 2485

Presented by Sydoney Blackmore, P4P PDX Co-Chair
February 6, 2023, Salem, OR

Good afternoon Representatives Nosse, Goodwin, Nelson, and all members of the House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care. My name is Sydoney Blackmore and I am a current dual-degree graduate student at Portland State University's School of Social Work and at the OHSU-PSU School of Public Health. I am also the co-chair of PSU's chapter of Payment for Placements, advocating for the end of the exploitation of field labor in social work education.

I am here today as a liaison for our chapter in support of House Bill 2485. We feel that this allocation is an important step in increasing access to higher education, ending exploitation through unpaid internships, and ending our state's behavioral health crisis. As students and members of our communities we see this crisis every day. We have clients who experience debilitating anxiety and depression, relapse and overdose, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and harm at the hands of others. We also have clients who finally experience joy, who find their path toward health, who choose sobriety, and clients who find peace with the trauma and grief they have experienced. We choose this profession because we know healing is possible.

However, it is not easy to choose this path and this education. Depending on residency status, we *pay* twelve- to eighteen-thousand dollars to *do* nearly a thousand hours of internship labor. In a [survey that our chapter conducted](#) at the beginning of this school year, we uncovered themes of struggle, suffocation, and exploitation among our classmates. While PSU's School of Social Work is leading the nation in finding ways for

students to be paid for their field labor, we found that 70% of students receive no compensation for their internships. Worst of all, we will never know the hundreds and thousands of brilliant students who never attended school because their circumstances could not support such extended overburden.

On a more personal note, I have seen this debt burden harm countless clients who no longer trust behavioral health services. I have worked in the rural communities of Columbia County for the past five-and-a-half years, doing work in healthy relationships, substance misuse prevention, and parenting education in close partnership with schools throughout the county. The turnover is so high that I, with only five years, am part of the old guard. But I cannot blame the providers who leave. Looking at the debt I will face after graduation, I wonder if I will be able to stay. I *want* to be there for *years* to come, and the debt I face may force me out.

I began graduate school in the Fall of 2020, and I remember budgeting my first year at the very end of 2019: if I took out the maximum amount of federal student loans, qualified for SNAP and OHP, and continued working part time while attending full-time classes I would have \$4 left over per term after rent, utilities, car insurance, gas, and food. And still I chose school.

On a final note, I want to acknowledge everyone's end goal in this is to address the behavioral health crisis Oregon State is facing. We know. We see. It takes time, care, compassion, patience, flexibility and sincerity to heal a community. With the cost of attendance, both in time and money, so prohibitively high, it is necessary to lower the barriers to the social work profession. We hope that you all, our representatives and neighbors, pass House Bill 2485 so we as a community can begin to heal. Thank you.