

February 9, 2023

Representative Ken Helm, Chair
House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use,
Natural Resources, and Water

RE: Testimony in Support of HB 3125

Chair Helm, Vice-Chair Hartman, Vice-Chair Owens, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Multnomah County and the Department of County Human Services, we are writing in support of HB 3125, which establishes the Public Drinking Water and Sewer Ratepayer Assistance Fund and allocates \$15 million to the fund.

HB 3125 would distribute much needed state financial assistance for water and sewer bill payments to low-income residential households. This assistance would provide critical support to low income Oregonians who have high home water bills and arrears that threaten both their access to water and their housing stability. Water bill payment programs meet a critical need especially for those with the highest home water burdens, meaning they pay the greatest proportion of their income towards their home drinking water and/or wastewater services.

Over the last year, our organization has had access to federal funding to provide water bill payment assistance in our community. We have served 738 households to date, with approximately 50% of our funding expended. Households served are at or below 60% of State Median Income, meaning a family of 4 cannot earn more than \$4,702.50 per month. The federal funding is due to expire in September 2023, though we anticipate it will be spent out sooner, due to the level of need in our community.

In addition to having their access to water ensured, participants have been able to stay in their homes because of this program. Many participants were facing eviction because of their high water and/or sewer bills, so assisting them with these bills helped them retain housing. Also, many households fell significantly behind in utility payments during the pandemic and this program allows households that were impacted by COVID to catch up.

Water is a basic need and access should be guaranteed for everyone in our community. The recent federal funding was the first of its kind to help low-income households with drinking and wastewater assistance and this program has been a significant benefit to those that can't afford water. This bill will allow us to continue to help low income households, since the federal program is temporary.

HB 3125 will build on the hard work undertaken to establish a program to distribute water and sewer bill payment assistance by investing state resources. It would use lessons learned from the federal program and expand access to Oregonians currently ineligible for assistance, including low-income Oregonians living in multi-family dwellings whose utilities are bundled with rent.

In closing, we would ask you to support HB 3125 and build on the success of the existing program that has been providing an essential service to many low-income Oregonians. In our

community, we are committed to helping prevent individuals from losing access to safe drinking water and wastewater and to addressing economic burdens that threaten their housing stability.

Thank you,

Mohammad Bader, MS,LPC
Director
Department of County Human Services

Peggy Samolinski
Director
Youth and Family Services Division