



Standing for dignity in the workplace

Testimony in Support of HB 2697
February 27, 2023

Chair Nosse, Vice Chairs Goodwin and Nelson, Members of the House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care,

My name is Kate Suisman. I am an attorney at the Northwest Workers' Justice Project (NWJP). Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony on this important bill.

We represent workers in low-wage jobs when bad things happen to them at work, like when they are not paid or are discriminated against for being in a protected class or are retaliated against for speaking up. Finally, we engage in policy advocacy and try to bring the important perspectives of workers in low-wage jobs and immigrant workers to these policy discussions.

We strongly encourage your support of HB 2697 to respond to the health care workforce crisis, support overloaded health care workers, and improve patient safety and care in our communities. As advocates for decent working conditions, NWJP believes that safe work conditions include fairness and preventing overwork. Health care professionals are not only important workers but also a first line of health defense in our communities. They deserve safe and stable workplaces to perform their jobs. Our clients side with other workers when they are demanding more support on the job, a clear path for employers to invest in and retain the workforce, and a clear path for the State to shore up the system.

Our clients at the NWJP are patients too. They have received health care from nurses who are strained and demoralized by the inability to respond to patient needs in a timely manner due to short staffing. Study after study shows that understaffing is associated with longer lengths of stay, higher mortality, higher infection, and readmission. Not one of us wishes to be the patient whose care is put at risk by the overtaxing of a hospital staff member, yet the far-reaching nature of the staffing crisis means it could be any of us.

We especially look forward to the introduction of staffing regulations that address the needs of workers to receive their breaks through HB 2697. All workers deserve their meal periods and breaks. Our clients, who range from construction workers to farmworkers, often come forward with stories of unlawfully withheld lunch and rest breaks, as well as unpaid overtime work. We know the importance of these legally required and much-needed breaks, especially for those with heavy work assignments. In health care, as in other sectors, meal and rest breaks should be accessible to all workers. Meaningful remedies should be accessible when employers break the law.

Oregon should establish nurse-to-patient standards as well as give workers a voice to determine safe staffing categories beyond hospital nursing. To ensure that these jobs are sustainable and that more workers are retained in the care setting, health care system workers and professionals have put forth HB 2697. Please join community members, advocates and workers in support.

Thank you very much.