

Submitter: Benjamin Dawson

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care

Measure: HB2697

As a registered nurse, having worked in hospitals in Oregon since 1994, and as a steward in the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, I can testify that hospitals are simply not providing the health care people need--not in terms of access, not in terms of quality or standards of care, not in terms of outcomes for patients. People are dying as a result.

It's a deepening crisis for anybody who needs health care, and staffing levels are at the heart of it.

It is, of course, no crisis at all for the giant corporations which own hospitals. They have been raking in billions. One of the ways they have been extracting those billions is by refusing to hire enough staff to provide the health care people need.

And I want to be very clear: it's not just nurses. It takes people in many different professions, all working together, to make a hospital run. We nurses are a big part of that, but we are by no means the whole story. For me to do my job taking care of critically ill people, I rely absolutely on the the highly skilled of physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, respiratory therapists, social workers, surgical technicians, medical technologists, radiological technicians, cardiac monitor technicians, pharmacy technicians, and many others--skills which, as in nursing, require years of scientific training and clinical experience to develop.

The hospital corporations have made it crystal clear, over many years, that they are not, out of the goodness of their hearts, going to hire enough staff to make hospitals provide they health care people need. The hospital corporations simply won't cough up the money until somebody makes them do it. Hence the need for legislation.

For some years now, Oregon has had laws on the books regarding nursing staffing in hospitals. It is just as important to guarantee proper staffing of professional and technical workers. As a nurse, it's great to have fellow nurses and CNAs on the floor; but it doesn't do me or my patients any good when there still aren't enough physical therapists to get them walking again, if there aren't enough respiratory therapists to get to them promptly when they can't breathe; I can't give administer the drugs my patients need when there aren't enough pharmacy techs to deliver the doses to the floor... So this bill certainly represents a step in the right direction.

As a union steward and a working RN, though, I have to say we have major concerns regarding this bill. With any mandate, enforcement is key; and this bill contains no

meaningful enforcement language. So, although it is a step in the right direction, we believe that it is unlikely to deliver any real change for the people of Oregon. As a practical matter, this bill, if passed in its current, toothless form, will just play into the hospital corporations' stalling game. In fact, the main practical difference it is likely to make in the lives of hospital professionals and technicians is to add more useless meetings with management to what are already incredibly stressful and frustrating jobs.

The track record of the current nursing staffing legislation is clear: the hospitals have stonewalled and stonewalled. The Oregon Health Authority, which has some authority to fine hospitals for this behavior, has been unwilling to use that authority, whether through regulatory capture of the agency by corporate interests or through lack of political will at the capitol. And the fines called for in the current legislation are not that big: even if OHA had the spine to levy fines for the hospitals' repeated violations, it is not clear that the hospital corporations wouldn't prefer just to pay the fines rather than cough up real money to hire enough staff. Oregon needs hospital staffing mandates, with mandatory enforcement--for nurses and for other hospital professionals and technicians.