



OREGON STATE FIRE FIGHTERS COUNCIL

International Association of Fire Fighters
AFL-CIO CLC

Senate Health Care Committee
Chair Senator Deb Patterson
Vice Chair Senator Cedric Hayden

Chair Patterson, Vice Chair Hayden, Committee Members,

For the record my name is Karl Koenig, President of the Oregon State Fire Fighters and we represent 3700 career fire fighters and paramedics throughout the great State of Oregon.

We are here to testify in opposition of SB 60, and the -1 amendments, the prohibition of requiring an Associate of Arts Degree as a minimum requirement to licensure as a Paramedic in Oregon.

Often, unprecedented times require unconventional approaches. SB 60 happens not to fit this situation to any standard we can determine. No data, there is no line of paramedics at the border saying we'd come work as paramedic in Oregon if it were not for your degree requirement. Those paramedics and EMT's are not there, or anywhere for that matter. Not in any kind of numbers that even scratch the surface of our Oregon paramedic shortage. This story repeats itself throughout the entire country. Degree or not.

We are hearing from all different sectors of EMS in Oregon. We need more paramedics, and they are not coming degree or not. OHA has several work arounds and exceptions to bypass or delay the degree requirement. Ask an Industry leader how many Paramedics are enough? 100, 200, 500? Is that a year or a one-time bolus to prop up for retirements and increased requests for service? I've been asking and not one answer is relatively close to another. That's a problem for the industry. No consensus on the need. How do we articulate solutions when the answer is repetitively, "It depends" With a multitude of answers from blaming an aging population, dwindling Medicare reimbursement rates, to wage challenges, city versus rural. None of those challenges are solved by a lowering of the degree requirement.

If we as a profession, believe the supporters of this Bill, kept potential paramedics and EMT's from coming to Oregon from other states, we are playing a game of misdirection. We only need to look at call volumes, call types and outcome data to know we are a system on the brink. Every day, every shift, every story the system is not keeping up with needs of our patients or our caregivers. Another reason to not change the Licensure requirements for paramedics.



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This destructive cycle of poor treatment all in the name of attracting new paramedics to Oregon is not a new phenomenon. Long before COVID, social strife, horrific treatment of other human beings, ambulance work was difficult at best. While those calls occurred since the beginning of EMS in Oregon, it's just not at the rate we are experiencing in today's EMS. It should be no surprise we are struggling to attract new employees, volunteers, and those interested or inquisitive about a career in EMS.

The degree requirement was not a social experiment gone amok. It was to bring professionalism to a difficult career choice and the hope that better working conditions, increases in pay, any retirement security at all was on the horizon. That was the late 1990's. Here we are over 20 years later with minimal movement in retirement security and very little change perhaps even a worsening of working conditions.

The best we can do is lift the degree requirement? Hoping that move doesn't somehow worsen our mass exodus from this profession. These rhetorical questions are now our reality. Desperation rarely leads to good outcomes. This is a multifaceted problem that we need to approach as a piece of any high performing EMS System.

The concise way to articulate this problem is wages, hours, working conditions, and retirement security matter. The Pew Family Trust examined the issue in 2021 study and found a 36% paramedic attrition rate and came to one conclusion; pay. We agree. Any lessening of the degree requirement is admitting defeat and along with the data not supporting the change, we are using desperation as a guide or decision making and not looking at the challenges through a clear lens.

Whether it is Medicare reimbursement in a aging population, corporate greed, unions demands, apathetic or misunderstood public sentiment of EMS professionals, we all know when Oregonians hear a siren on the way to their home or work or wherever they may be that help is on the way. This exchange of immediacy between those in need is that the paramedics will be the best trained, best equipped, best compensated, best staffed paid or volunteer paramedic arriving to take care of them. Nothing else. We often get tied up in quick solutions thinking that any movement is good.

We are not in favor of the -1 amendments either. We prefer a systematic approach in evaluating EMS in Oregon. A timed break in Licensure does nothing to improve the crisis in our opinion.

This proposed solution is not it.



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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. If the Committee has any questions, please ask.

Regards

Karl Koenig s/s

Karl Koenig
President
Oregon State Fire Fighters Council