



Dear Chair Grayber, Vice-chairs Lewis and Tran, and members of the Committee On Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans:

My name is Kimberly Riper, and I work as a mental health registered nurse at the Oregon State Hospital (“OSH”). I have worked at OSH for 12 years, most of it on a high-acuity admissions unit. I always knew that I wanted to specialize in mental health and was thrilled when I was hired as a new graduate nurse at OSH. Today I am writing and asking for your support for HB 2701 with the -3 amendment.

When I began my job at OSH, I was not prepared for how intense and dangerous the job would be, however. The patients in my unit are admitted directly from jail. Many come from traumatic backgrounds and are mistrustful of those who try to help them. They are frequently aggressive, and I have been punched in the face, slapped, spit on, groped, chased, and had handfuls of my hair pulled out – all in the course of my daily duties. I have seen patients assault my OSH coworkers and other patients, including knocking them unconscious, breaking their noses, and knocking out their teeth. I am sensitive to loud noises now and find it hard to relax even when not at work. I have a hard time discussing my job with my friends and family because I don’t want to traumatize them. I love my job because of the positive impact I make and do not want to leave, but it will be difficult, if not impossible, to make it another 18 years at OSH (to receive my full retirement benefits after 30 years of service) in these high-risk conditions.

House Bill 2701 would create a new “high risk/high stress” category in PERS for both OSH employees and 911 operators, allowing them to retire earlier with full benefits as well as receive an increase in their final average salary. It also lowers the age for OSH workers and 911 operators related to when Oregon Public Service Retirement Plan workers can retire with full benefits from 65 to the later of either 60 years old or 5 years of service.

The passage of this bill is important to me for several reasons. First, it would be a public acknowledgement of the hard, dangerous work my coworkers and I do every day at OSH. Second, it would allow my coworkers and I to retire before our bodies are too damaged to enjoy our remaining years. I have seen coworkers retire after decades of service at OSH still nursing injuries – many permanent – sustained at OSH, affecting their quality of life. Finally, the passage of this bill would bring equality to the benefits received by public servants in high-risk work environments, which include not just first responders but also myself and other OSH workers facing the significant mental health crisis in the state of Oregon.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on this important issue, and I hope you vote yes on House Bill 2701 with the -3 amendment.

Sincerely,
Kimberly Riper