

To: House Committee On Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans

From: Mike Powers, President of SEIU Local 503

Date: March 30, 2023

RE: Testimony in support of HB 2701 High Risk, High Stress

Dear Chair Grayber, Vice Chair Lewis, Vice Chair Tran, and members of the committee,

My name is Mike Powers. I am President of SEIU Local 503. I am testifying in support HB 2701 to bring a High Risk, High Stress retirement pension to frontline workers at the Oregon State Hospital (OSH), which encompasses state psychiatric care facilities.

I want to thank the Legislature for the investments made in mental and behavioral health services and workforce. Unfortunately, much more needs to be done. The continued underfunding of services and critical staffing needs not only impacts the workforce but the quality of care for patients, further exacerbating the mental health crisis in Oregon. This also leads to workplace injuries and illnesses for our state hospital workers.

Critical staffing shortages are an issue that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but which has only worsened in recent years. In 2021, officials requested support from the Oregon National Guard on two separate occasions to supplement staffing at OSH. While the legislature has since allocated position authority to OSH so they can begin to fill those vacant positions, there needs to be a renewed focus on how the agency is recruiting for these positions.

Relying on the Oregon National Guard is not a solution to the problem of staff recruitment and retention.

Work at psychiatric care facilities like OSH is uniquely challenging compared to other work. Patients experiencing acute mental health and behavioral issues, particularly when staffing is not adequate, can be hostile toward staff and other patients. This results in physical injuries such as cuts, bruises, and fractures, as well as the mental trauma of a physical attack, especially for workers involved in patient restraint or high-security roles.

OSH currently has the highest incidence of occupational injuries and illnesses of any industry in Oregon, making it the most stressful workplace in the state. In fact, in 2021, OSH staff lost over 720 days (about 2 years) as the result of workplace injuries while also accounting for the most overtime hours compared to other programs areas under the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

Today, you will hear from our members who work at Oregon's psychiatric care facilities. The written testimony submitted for the public record is meant to provide a context for the high risk, high stress nature of the occupations. For many, it is not easy to share their stories after moving on from psychiatric care, or changing roles on the job due to an injury. Workers describe incidents resulting in serious, traumatic injuries with long-term impacts on their physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Because of the high rate of and the severity of injury to OSH workers, they deserve, and need, improved retirement benefits that recognize the risk, but also the dignity and value of their years of service.

These benefits are vital for the well-being of OSH workers who must often retire early due to the immense physical, emotional, and mental toll while on the job. OSH workers have been an unrecognized and undervalued part of Oregon's healthcare system. Adequate staffing and secure retirement benefits would begin to provide the minimum recognition of their work.

I urge the members of this committee to vote affirmatively to support OSH workers and enhance retirement benefits. We need the Legislature to support the workers at OSH so that our members can do the jobs they love: serving patients.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. Thank you for your time and consideration,

Mike Powers,

President of SEIU Local 503