

HB 2676

Testimony

Hello Chair Prozenski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee.

For the record, my name is Sarah Van Dyke. I work for Clackamas County's Health, Housing and Human Services Department as the Domestic Violence Systems Coordinator. I am here in strong support for House Bill 2676.

A portion of this bill amends the Department of Justice's coverage of forensic exams for victims of violence. This change would allow for the coverage of any hospital costs resulting from the use of strangulation forensic evidence kits with survivors of this dangerous crime.

Strangulation can be lethal – unconsciousness can occur within seconds and death within minutes. Non-lethal strangulation, however, is far more common and carries with it serious physical and emotional consequences for the survivor, and is a strong predictor of future lethality for the victim. For these reasons, it is imperative that communities focus on this particular type of domestic violence.

Beginning in 2018, I have had the privilege of coordinating Clackamas County's response to near- and non-fatal domestic violence strangulation. In the past 5 years, the *Clackamas County Strangulation Response Initiative* has been working to improve the identification, response, and prosecution of strangulation from the first call to 911 through prosecution of offenders. We have developed countywide protocols that guide the work of law enforcement, parole and probation, prosecutors, service providers, and medical partners. In 2022, we brought the international experts in strangulation to the county and trained almost 200 professionals from around Oregon on the subject.

Strangulation has been overlooked due to the frequent lack of visual injury and the lack of training of the medical community. To address this issue, the Strangulation Response Initiative developed the **Strangulation Forensic Evidence Kit** – or SKIT - in 2020. The kit allows a comprehensive examination of a victim and the collection of any forensic evidence by trained personnel in medical facilities.

Originally designed for use just in Clackamas County, the program quickly expanded to other Oregon counties: strangulation kits are currently available in 30 hospitals and facilities in 11 Oregon counties. In the two years between 2021 and 2022, 130 SKITs were completed with strangulation survivors in Oregon – over 30% of those in Clackamas County. Each one of those kits represents a person who experienced strangulation and was in need of medical assistance. The goal is to have strangulation kits available in every community in Oregon within the next couple of years.

The SKIT itself is inexpensive to produce and has no cost associated with its use, but being cared for in the emergency room does, especially if scans or tests are needed to check for damage to the neck. Victims often resist the exam due to the anticipated medical costs that may be beyond their means. Unlike sexual assault exams, those costs are not currently specifically covered for the strangulation exam.

House Bill 2676 would fix this gap in coverage for one of the most dangerous crimes a victim can experience. Allowing for the costs associated with strangulation exams to be covered by Crime Victims' Compensation would ensure that victims referred to this vital medical care will not incur financial burdens that they should not have to bear along with the inevitable repercussions of a strangulation assault.

Clackamas County supports the passage of HB 2676.

Thank you for your time.