



SB 142: BH Workforce Incentives Needed for Public Behavioral Health System

March 18, 2025

Chair Reynolds, Vice-Chair Anderson and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Association of Community Mental Health Programs (AOCMHP), I write to express our support for SB 142 and the -1 amendment as a means to recruit and retain workforce in our public behavioral health system. It is critical to focus investments on organizations that provide behavioral health care to adults or youth, of which at least 50 percent are uninsured or enrolled in Medicaid or Medicare, and on culturally specific organizations that serve a particular cultural community.

The public behavioral health system continues to experience high vacancy rates, particularly in crisis and intensive service areas, and especially in qualified mental health professional (master's level) positions. The proposed investment in SB 142-1 for incentives like housing, childcare and tuition assistance will help the public behavioral health system retain workers so that they do not leave for the private system where the work is easier and better compensated.

By directly addressing the financial disincentives and administrative burdens that often drive behavioral health workers to private-sector roles, this incentive program will strengthen the public system's ability to provide consistent, high-quality care to Oregon's most vulnerable populations. In order to avoid pay equity law violations for some public behavioral health entities, we propose adding language like:

"Notwithstanding the definition of "compensation" in ORS 652.210, a hiring or retention bonus or other incentive paid under section 3 of this bill is not a violation of ORS 652.220".

Although we hope many behavioral health workers will make a career out of public system service, we know it is not for everyone. Given this reality, we recommend that loan repayment and forgiveness grants provided by the Office of Rural Health come with the requirement that behavioral health provider recipients sign a stay agreement for at least two years at an entity that is eligible for a grant under section 3 of SB 142.

We are grateful to the Governor for her leadership in bringing this bill forward in support of Oregon's public behavioral health system. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 142-1.

Sincerely,

Cherryl L. Ramirez
Director, AOCMHP