

Submitter: Alexandra Perez Urbina
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB2024

Chair Nosse, Vice Chairs Javadi and Nelson, and Members of the Committee, My name is Alexandra Perez Urbina, and I am a social worker working in Portland. I am here today to express my strong support for the -2 amendment to HB 2024, which seeks to address the severe workforce shortages in Oregon's behavioral health system.

Oregon is facing a behavioral health crisis. In 2022, Mental Health America ranked Oregon 49th in the nation for adult access to mental health services and dead last (51st) for youth access. While there has been some progress, Oregon still ranks 47th overall, meaning thousands of people continue to struggle to find care when they need it.

I am a CSWA, and see clients for mental health services daily. I have a full caseload, with a waitlist of about 7 people. I have had to start turning people away. I am BIPOC and folx with that experience seek me out. There aren't a lot of us in the profession.

Like many of my colleagues, I have personally faced challenges in staying in this profession. I experience burnout weekly, as well as shame and guilt for not being able to take on more people. 22 out of my 24 of my caseload has experienced trauma, 19 out of the 22 have complex trauma, which makes my work very stressful. I love all of my clients, but there are days where I go from one intense session to another to another and I feel like I am running on fumes. The worst of it happened last year where I thought about quitting and working at the Oregon Zoo shoveling horse poop (I'm serious). I was so overwhelmed and wanted something easy and peaceful.

My wages as an associate are low and I can barely make it by living in Portland. My agency offers PTO, but it isn't a lot, so I am hesitant to take it unless I really need it, and I am not salaried, so when client don't show up, I don't get paid. I have about \$45K of credit card debt--this is how I survived college and paid for my groceries--it's how I pay for my groceries now. I live paycheck to paycheck. I am a recipient of the OHA loan repayment programs, and thank goddess for that because things would be so much worse if I weren't. Programs like that are game changers for new therapists! I may have had to look for a better paying job were it not for the loan repayment program! There's no way I would have been able to pay over \$1000 a month for student debt and afford my rent.

Despite these challenges, I remain deeply committed to this work because I see every day how much my clients need support. I love my clients. I love seeing them every day and seeing them grow. But without real investments in workforce retention and recruitment, Oregon will continue to lose talented and dedicated behavioral health professionals.

The solution

This amendment is a critical step toward stabilizing our workforce by providing:

Scholarships and tuition assistance for future providers

Loan forgiveness and repayment incentives

Housing assistance

Wage increases and retention bonuses

Child care support

Professional development opportunities

These are exactly the kinds of investments that will help keep people like me—and the next generation of providers—in this field.

I want to thank Representative Nosse for his leadership on this issue and for carrying this important bill. Investing in the behavioral health workforce is an investment in the well-being of all Oregonians.

I urge you to support this amendment and help ensure that the people who provide these critical services can afford to stay in this profession and continue making a difference in our communities.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions.

Peacefully,

Alexandra