

RE: Testimony of the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs (OCBA) in Support of SB 5501
Before the Oregon State Legislature

3/18/25

Dear Co-Chairs Gorsek and Smith, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means
subcommittee on General Government,

The Oregon Commission on Black Affairs (OCBA) submits this testimony in strong support of SB 5501, which seeks to appropriate critical funding for the Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office (OACO). As one of the four statutory commissions under OACO, we are responsible for advocating on behalf of Black Oregonians to advance racial equity and justice in policy and governance. However, chronic underfunding has stifled our ability to fulfill this mission effectively.

This is not just about funding an office, it is about whether the State of Oregon will take real, tangible action to address systemic inequities that persist in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color (BIPOC) across the state. Without adequate resources, the very communities we are mandated to uplift remain unheard, underserved, and underrepresented.

Oregon's BIPOC Communities: Resilience Amidst Inequities


BIPOC communities have long been the backbone of Oregon's economy, culture, and social fabric. Yet, they face systemic barriers in housing, education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Consider the following:

- **Economic Disparities:** Black Oregonians earn, on average, 40% less than white Oregonians. According to the Oregon Employment Department, the median income for Black workers is \$27,500, compared to \$46,900 for white workers.
- **Housing Insecurity:** Oregon has one of the highest rates of Black homelessness in the nation, with Black Oregonians experiencing homelessness at nearly four times the rate of their white counterparts despite making up less than 2% of the state's population.
- **Health Disparities:** Black and Indigenous communities face disproportionately higher rates of maternal mortality, chronic disease, and mental health crises due to systemic healthcare inequities and barriers to access.
- **Education Gaps:** The graduation rate for Black students in Oregon is 12% lower than that of their white peers. Limited access to culturally responsive education and support services perpetuates cycles of disadvantage.

Despite these challenges, BIPOC communities continue to lead, innovate, and contribute to Oregon's prosperity. However, their ability to thrive is continuously hindered without proper state investment. The OACO and its commissions are uniquely positioned to advocate for equitable policies, but we need the resources to do our job effectively.

The Work of OCBA: What We Have Done and What We Hope to Do

Despite these funding challenges, OCBA has worked tirelessly to advocate for Black Oregonians. Some of our key accomplishments and future goals include:



1. Policy Advocacy for Racial Equity

- OCBA helped develop Oregon's Bias Incidents and Hate Crimes Fact Sheet, ensuring that communities of color understand their rights and protections under state law.
- We supported legislation to address racial disparities in policing, pushing for more vigorous oversight and accountability in public safety.
- Our commission has advised the Legislature on issues impacting Black Oregonians, including housing discrimination, racial profiling, and economic inequities.
- OCBA, along with its sister advocacy Commissions, have dedicated seats written in statutes on other boards and Commissions to provide adequate community input on equity work.
- All four advocacy commissions have extensive participation in HB 4052 work, which declared racism as a public health crisis, including participating in focus groups, supporting drafting of proposed solutions, and advocating for solutions introduced as legislative bills.

2. Economic and Workforce Development

- OCBA has worked with state agencies and local governments to advocate for greater BIPOC representation in Oregon's workforce and leadership roles.
- We have engaged in discussions to increase funding for Black-owned businesses and address barriers to entrepreneurship.

3. Addressing Housing and Homelessness

- OCBA has worked with state agencies and advocacy groups to address the racial disparities in Oregon's housing crisis.
- We have advocated for policies that protect BIPOC renters from discrimination and displacement.


4. Education Equity and Youth Advocacy

- OCBA has supported policies to close the education achievement gap for Black students.
- We have pushed for more culturally responsive curricula and the hiring of Black educators in Oregon schools.

The Consequences of Chronic Underfunding

The Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office has been operating on an inadequate budget for years, with only a single full-time Executive Director and minimal staff supporting four separate commissions. This is an unsustainable model that undermines the impact and effectiveness of our work.

Without proper funding:

- **Our ability to influence state policy is weakened.** We cannot provide data-driven recommendations to inform equitable legislation without dedicated research and policy staff.
 - **BIPOC voices remain unheard.** We lack the resources for community engagement, meaning those most affected by policy decisions are left out of the conversation.
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- **State leadership lacks culturally competent insight.** The commissions are essential liaisons between the state government and Oregon's BIPOC communities. Without adequate funding, this critical link is severed.

In short, underfunding the OACO means underfunding BIPOC Oregonians.

Investing in the OACO Is an Investment in Oregon's Future

Passing SB 5501 is not just about fixing a budget shortfall, it is about ensuring that Oregon's leadership reflects the diversity of its people and that BIPOC communities receive the representation and advocacy they deserve.

Adequate funding for the OACO will allow us to:

- **Expand community outreach** and ensure BIPOC voices shape legislative priorities.
- **Strengthen policy advocacy** by hiring dedicated researchers and policy analysts.
- **Improve coordination** between the commissions, state agencies, and community organizations.
- **Develop proactive solutions** to racial and gender disparities in housing, education, and economic opportunity.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Oregon cannot claim to be a leader in equity while continuing to underfund the commissions that fight for it. The passage of SB 5501 is a moral imperative. We urge the Legislature to take action now, not as an act of charity, but as an investment in Oregon's future. Equity must be more than a talking point; it must be reflected in our policies, priorities, and budgets.

We urge you to support SB 5501 and stand with us in ensuring that all Oregonians, regardless of race, gender, or background, have a fair and just opportunity to succeed.

Respectfully submitted,
Oregon Commission on Black Affairs



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