

**Written Testimony for the Legislative Tour
April 11, 2025 – La Grande, Oregon
Submitted April 11, 2025**

Senator Kate Lieber, Co-Chair
Representative Tawna Sanchez, Co-Chair
Vice Co-Chairs Girod, Gomberg, and Smith
Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Oregon Legislature
Salem, Oregon 97301

RE: Support for HB 2024 – Strengthening Oregon’s Behavioral Health Workforce

Dear Co-Chair Lieber and Co-Chair Sanchez, Vice Co-Chairs Girod, Gomberg, and Smith, and Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means,

My name is Kaitlyn Gekeler. I work in La Grande, Oregon as a school-based mental health clinician and am currently pursuing (and almost finished with!) my Master’s in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. I’m writing today in support of HB 2024 because I feel particularly passionate and want to help solve a problem I see illustrated every day. I see the challenges facing Oregon’s behavioral health system from several perspectives: as a provider in the field and as a student preparing to step more fully into this profession.

Across the state, the need for mental health services has grown rapidly, but the workforce hasn’t kept up. Individuals and families are waiting far too long to receive care. Providers are leaving due to low pay (especially when compared to private practice), overwhelming caseloads, and due to the emotional burnout of trying to help so many people while feeling unsupported and undervalued by the systems and communities that need them the most. This is everyday people—kids, parents, individuals in crisis—who are left trying to get by without the support they need.

As a student in this field, I see the enthusiasm of my peers and future colleagues, but I also see their hesitation and anxiety. Many of us are deeply passionate about this work, especially those of us in community mental health, but we’re stepping into a system that often doesn’t provide the financial stability or structural support needed to be successful personally and professionally. The cost of living, tuition, and required internships (often unpaid) can feel unmanageable. Pay is low and loan forgiveness is complicated and far in the future... and at some times, doubtful.

And we’re still battling stigma—both around getting mental health care and choosing it as a profession. Especially in rural or close-knit communities, seeking help can feel risky. And those of us doing this work are sometimes undervalued compared to other health professionals, even though we’re often on the front lines of some of the toughest challenges. This isn’t just a career for many of us. This is a calling, and we are losing brilliant, compassionate people because the system makes it too difficult to stay. We can’t afford to lose more of us who are dedicated to making a difference and we certainly can’t stop increasing our workforce.

HB 2024 is a meaningful step toward change and invests directly in the people doing the work. It helps build a pathway for those who want to enter the field and stay, long-term, in behavioral health.

This bill:

- Provides \$20 million to the Oregon Health Authority for targeted reimbursement increases so providers working with high-acuity populations are fairly compensated for critical, challenging work.
- Allocates \$5 million to the United We Heal Labor Management Trust, which expands training, apprenticeships, and career development in behavioral health.
- Establishes a Workforce Incentive Grant Program to support providers with housing stipends, childcare assistance, tuition help, and more—practical tools that remove barriers and help build long-term careers in this field.

What it comes down to is, we can't expand access to care if we don't have the workforce to deliver it. We can't ask people to commit to this profession if the system doesn't support them in return. And we can't expect Oregon families to thrive if we don't invest in the people who help them through their hardest moments.

I love this work. I believe deeply in the power of mental health care to change lives. But passion isn't enough to fix a system—policy and investment are necessary too. As a clinician, a student, and a parent, I urge you to support HB 2024. It's the kind of smart, compassionate legislation that helps everyone.

Please vote yes on HB 2024.

Thank you for your time,

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