

April 11, 2025

Sen. Kate Lieber, Cochair

Rep. Tawna Sanchez, Cochair

Joint Committee on Ways and Means RE: HB 3363 and SB 24

Cochairs Lieber and Sanchez, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means

My name is Patricia (Trish) Houtz, and I have worked for the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) since September 1, 2006. I have been an OPSRP (Tier Three) PERS participant since November 2003.

COVID and lack of adequate staffing at Two Rivers Correctional Institution (TRCI) and Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution (EOCI) led to the 2020 DPSST decision which granted DOC Security Plus (office staff, counselors, food service coordinators and physical plant workers) to work security posts to alleviate a fraction of the mandatory overtime required by the security staff, DOC sworn officers.

As a Security Plus employee, some of my colleagues and I volunteered to fill the vacant posts as overtime staff alongside the Correctional Officers to share the overtime load. We, too, have worked way over the 300 hours cap in OT. We first opted in to helping out during the pandemic when things were pretty stark. We thought that the amount of overtime would lessen when we came out of lockdown, but currently we haven't had any relief. All staff have and continue to help keep the institutions as safe as possible during this short staffing. The overtime worked keeps the public, Adults in Custody (AIC) and staff safe within the 24/7 facilities. DOC has mandated overtime to address the short staffing.

DOC health services staffing also needs attention. The nursing crisis during COVID created a domino effect with demands for nurses. DOC has not been able to bounce back from this deficit of nurses and other medical staff. Currently, we use contract nurses as a band aid to help the DOC nurses, but this is expensive, and the contract nurses are limited to the duties they can currently perform. They have difficulty obtaining a badge, and so they have to be paired with a DOC nurse so that they can move through the security check points throughout the facility. They do not get enough training. Raising the wages of the nurses in DOC so that we are competitive with other employers would assist in hiring for these open positions in all 12 Institutions, and I know that it will especially help EOCI and TRCI.

As a member of the DOC Statewide Wellness Council, I believe asking the Legislature for support to ensure that our staff and their wellness is a priority. Numerous staff, both security and security plus, working long hard hours falls well below the expectations of wellness.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to speak on these important matters. Please invest in HB 3363 and SB 24 to ensure a safer worksite and better access to medical staffing for AICs.

Patricia Houtz

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