

TO: Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services
FROM: Stacy Michaelson, SEIU Local 503
RE: Addictions and Mental Health Budget
DATE: February 28, 2013

Co-Chairs Nathanson and Bates, Members of the Committee:

On behalf of our members who work at the State Hospital campuses, I would like to first acknowledge the work that has been done to strengthen the provision of mental health services in our state. There is broad agreement that those suffering from mental illness have benefitted from increased treatment setting options and that conditions at the state hospital have improved in recent years. However, there is also further work to be done.

As you've already heard from others, the need for updated and adequate training for staff is great. The training that staff currently receive is insufficient to guarantee the safety of patients and other workers. A training program that is designed with the new facility and current patient population in mind would go a long way toward ameliorating concerns over the safety of patients and staff. Our members would also like to see an updated review of safety and restraint practices to ensure that internal policies reflect the circumstances at the hospital. While it is true that the Salem campus has units dedicated to the patients with the *most* extreme behavioral issues, this does not mean that there is no longer concern over the intermingling of patients with behavior problems and others. Issues of patient-on-patient intimidation are still prevalent and further efforts to separate those patients who impede the progress of others are needed.

We believe that a concerted look at safety policies and training practices will ultimately be useful in improving staffing levels as well as addressing scheduling concerns. In previous sessions, our members often discussed the problem with mandated overtime at the State Hospital. Thanks to the efforts of the Legislature, we believed the issue had been resolved; in fact the change in scheduling combined with an increased relief pool did result in vast improvements. However, the relief pool is not currently adequate to meet the staffing needs of the hospital and staff are once again facing mandated overtime at an unsustainable level, both in terms of employee morale as well as actual financial cost to the state. Creating an adequate relief pool of permanent staff would ensure the availability of fresh workers to cover shifts, reducing overtime costs as well as employee stress.

I again want to stress our appreciation for this body's attention to the conditions at the State Hospital and for the improvements that have been made in our state's mental health system. Through a combination of improvements at our state hospital as well as recognition of the important role of community mental health providers, we believe that Oregon is moving in the right direction when it comes to caring for our mentally ill population. In light of the recognition that has been given to the importance of keeping individuals connected to their communities, we do have concerns over the proposal to close the Blue Mountain Recovery Center – the only state hospital east of the Cascades. We request that the facility remain open for the 2013-15 biennium to allow local organizations and mental health partners time to work with CMS to develop a proposal for the best use of the facility going forward. Given the vital role that BMRC has played in the lives of many Eastern Oregonians, we believe that taking this time to pursue a public-private partnership to maintain service in the area is the least that can be asked.

SEIU Local 503 members have been pleased with many of the improvements that have been made in recent years. We also believe that there are steps to be taken to further the progress we are making toward best serving mentally ill Oregonians, and hope you will consider these proposals we you work through the budgeting process. Thank you.