



Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 726

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February 12, 2019

Senate Committee on Workforce

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 726 on behalf of the Oregon Nurses Association. My name is Allison Seymour and I am a registered nurse currently employed at Salem Hospital. ONA represents nearly 15,000 nurses throughout the state, providing care in almost every setting of our health care industry imaginable—staff nurses in large and small hospitals alike, school base health centers, local public health departments, and some county corrections facilities. Oregon has long led the nation with regard to nursing practice, standards and safety—for registered nurses and advanced practice nurses alike across numerous patient care environments.

First I would like to thank to other advocates here today and especially those who are sharing personal experiences.

The recent media focus on sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement has many people questioning the practices in their workplace. As a nurse I and others have thought about how truly prevalent and pervasive harassment and discrimination is in our workplace.

SB 726 is a step in the right direction not only for nurses, but for all Oregonians.

Not only do nurses encounter harassment and discrimination from colleagues and we also can encounter it from our patients, clients and visitors. Furthermore, surveys indicate that nurses are hesitant to report incidents that involve patients.

I have witnessed colleagues suffer from racial discrimination when a patient refuses care from non-Caucasian staff. I have witnessed both male and female colleagues suffer from sexist remarks and discrimination. I have witnessed and been the victim of sexual harassment including inappropriate comments, jokes, suggestive behavior, physical advances and physical contact. And this happens on a monthly basis.

Today in testimony many people may define sexual harassment. The WHO defines sexual harassment as “any unwanted, unreciprocated, and unwelcomed behavior of a sexual nature that is offensive to the person involved, and causes that person to be threatened, humiliated, or embarrassed.”¹

In most cases nurses and other victims do not report incidents of harassment and discrimination. While there are many reasons for this, in many cases individuals have fears of

¹ “Is Sexual Harassment of Nurses Prevalent in Health Care?”. <https://voice.ons.org/stories/is-sexual-harassment-of-nurses-prevalent-in-health-care>



retaliation or inaction after a report. SB 726 works to remove some of the barriers that prevent incident reporting.

The decision to report is a difficult one when it can affect your financial security. SB 726 prevents employers from requesting provisions that prevent the rehiring of previously discriminated-against employees during settlement agreements. This provision could be especially helpful for nurses who seek employment in rural communities. When there is only one hospital in the county, you can imagine how difficult it would be to make the decision to make a report that could not only lead to unemployment, but also relocation.

It is concerning that nurses report that harassment interferes with their ability to do their jobs and provide safe care. Studies indicate that when nurses and other healthcare professionals experience workplace discrimination they report feeling increased stress levels, depression, lack of sleep, lack of job satisfaction and contributes to some leaving the profession all together.² In one 2017 national survey, nurses that reported being harassed in their workplace were twice as likely to consider leaving nursing compared to those who reported no harassment.³

Employers with inadequate policies and procedures allow discrimination to occur. SB 726 creates policies and procedures for employers and employees that relate to sexual harassment.

In addition, nondisclosure agreements hinder an employee's ability to speak up. SB 726 prevents employers from imposing nondisclosure agreements that relate to discrimination at the time of hiring and during settlement and severance negotiations.

Despite clear federal and state definitions of prohibited acts of discrimination, these instances still take place and occur far too often in our workplaces. I commend and appreciate the actions of our elected leaders to make a difference and this critical work intended to better ensure a harassment-free work environment for all Oregonians.

For these reasons, **ONA urges your support for SB 726.** Thank you again for your time.

² "Sexual Harassment in Nursing: How Far is Too Far?". <https://www.registerednursing.org/sexual-harassment/>

³ "Survey Finds Nearly Half of Nurses Considering Leaving the Profession". <https://rnnetwork.com/blog/rnnetwork-nurse-survey/>