

Nehalem Bay Health District

278 Rowe St. – Wheeler, OR 97147

Phone: (503) 368-5119

<http://nehalembayhd.org>

Testimony of Marc C. Johnson

President, Nehalem Bay Health District

Prepared for the Oregon House Committee on Human Services and Housing

May 29, 2019

Chair Keny Guyer, Vice Chairs Noble and Sanchez, Members of the Committee:

For the record my name is Marc Johnson. I serve as the President of the Nehalem Bay Health District, which serves northern Tillamook County. One of the essential services we provide in rural Tillamook County is licensed skilled nursing and rehabilitation care in Wheeler, Oregon – the Nehalem Valley Care Center – part of beautiful House District 32. I'm here today to share insights and experiences regarding the workforce challenges that we face operating in coastal Oregon.

First, I'd like to share more about our impact in the area. In recent community surveys sponsored by the health district and designed to gather information about the future direction of the district there was overwhelming public recognition of the vital role the Care Center plays in our community. The Center is the only facility of its kind on the Oregon coast between Astoria and Newport. The Center provides short-term rehabilitation services to area residents who transition from a hospital setting to their home and for a number of residents with needs for round-the-clock skilled nursing care the Care Center will likely be their last home. Without the Center, I truly do not know where our residents would go – but certainly they would not be able to live in their own community.

The Care Center is a major employer in north Tillamook County, but like most, if not all, rural Oregon counties, adequate housing for the Center's work force is a significant issue. The majority of our staff at the Care Center commute to Wheeler from southern Tillamook County, Clatsop County and beyond, in part because of a lack of affordable housing.

Since 2017, the current board of the health district has worked diligently with our operator, Aidan Health Services, an Oregon company, to identify impediments to attracting and retaining CNA staff. The Care Center administration has implemented numerous strategies, including aggressive recruitment in and out of the immediate market, sponsorship of CNA training, and most recently recruitment of qualified staff from other countries. Care Center managers have also offered bonuses to current staff to work shifts to cover occasional periods when staff is less than optimal.

Recently, the board adopted a new five-year strategic plan that includes specific strategies to strengthen the Care Center and address workforce issues, including aggressive assessment of potential work force housing options that the district might sponsor or otherwise encourage.

As you know, attracting and retaining medical professionals in rural Oregon is a serious and long-running problem. An Oregon Center for Nursing study in 2018 noted “there is strong evidence that rural communities across the state face increasing pressure to recruit and retain qualified nurses” and that “high vacancy rates and even higher turnover rates show that many employers are facing problems maintaining an adequate nursing workforce.” Our situation, while hardly unique is a perfect illustration of this problem.

Along with all these broader workforce challenges, our efforts are frankly being impeded by punitive actions taken by the Department of Human Services in response to our staffing shortages. Like everyone else, we have limited resources. Fines only serve to further limit our efforts to address the root cause of these issues, as much as one health district can. It is important to note there has been no indication that the Care Center’s self-reported staffing issues have in any way impacted the quality patient care, a circumstance that seems to underscore the punitive nature of the penalties. We believe this is an opportunity to evaluate our current processes. I would commit to working with the department, other providers, and stakeholders to find solutions that do not compromise our core mission of quality care. We need solutions that offer flexibility and common-sense approaches to dealing with an ever-growing aging population and a shrinking workforce for these essential positions that require hard work and compassionate hearts.

Thank you for taking the time to hear about our issues today. I would be happy to answer any questions.