

Testimony to

My name is Mary Lou Hennrich and I am offering this testimony in support of HB 2337, declaring Racism as a Public emergency.

I am a retired nurse and Public Health Administrator and was also the founding CEO of CareOregon. I have experience as a staff nurse, public health manager and executive leader of two health related non-profits.

My public health nursing career began in 1969 when I was fortunate to be hired by Multnomah County Health Department and had my first assignment as a District and School Nurse in the Albina neighborhood of Northeast Portland. At that time, most of the residents were African American and most of the nurses and other health and social service providers were white, like me.

Our team of public health/school nurses were very fortunate to have an amazing supervisor who eventually became the Director of Multnomah county health Department where she led and helped develop cutting edge public health programs working with the diverse residents and communities in Multnomah County.

Billi Odegaard was “before her time” in recruiting, mentoring, promoting and nurturing staff who reflected the diverse clients we served. She began by reaching out and hiring four Black Licensed Practical Nurses, instead of three white nurses who had Bachelor’s Degrees, as had been the previous practice. (There were very few Black Bachelor’s prepared nurses in Portland in 1969 and the few that were, were already hired by the County—one of them was a nurse who later became my second supervisor, Gloria McClendon.). I was so fortunate to “grow up” and be mentored by these capable women and I will be forever grateful to them and Billi for hiring them.

The many years following this first public health experience, built on this diverse foundation—establishing a “Refugee Health Center” in the early ‘80’s when Portland became home to many Southeast Asian Refugees and subsequently many other cultures. We hired many community health workers, interpreters, and as many nurses and doctors from these communities as possible. I am forever grateful to Dr. Bruce Bliatout, MPH, PhD for his outstanding patience and leadership in our developing culturally appropriate and specific services for this clinic and many other outreach services.

We LEARNED from them and not to say we were “perfect” by any means, but they taught us and we evolved in ways that I would never have thought possible without these amazing cultural and racially diverse mentors.

Remember, many of these experiences were more than 30 years ago and Portland/Multnomah County was very predominantly “white.” We were privileged to have Gladys McCoy as chair of the County Commission during some of those years and such other great activists such as Gretchen Kafoury. Matthew Prophet was Superintendent of Portland Public Schools and worked closely with us as we sited the first School Based Health Center at Roosevelt High School in 1985. This was very controversial and the partnership with Superintendent Prophet allow us to site a second center at Jefferson High School the following year. We recruited an outstanding Black nurse leader, Jeanine Tebeau to lead/staff the mostly black student body at the Jefferson Clinic. (There are now 75 School Based Health Centers throughout the state.)

I could go on for pages more, listing the efforts and yes, mistakes, we made, but I am eternally grateful for the myriad of colleagues/friends of color who I was privileged to share my career with.

I took these learnings and experiences with me as we built CareOregon in the early 1990's. We were committed to having staff who reflected the population we served and when I left as founding CEO in 2003, over 30% of our staff were "of color" similar to our members.

Now—despite all of these efforts, we were not able to negate the many disparities in health outcomes in Black, Latinx, Asian and Indigenous residents of the County. We slowly came to understand that Social Determinants of Health, including the STRESS of micro and macro aggressions that confront people of color daily could not "be fixed" by clinical services alone. Housing, access to clean air, water and food along with decreasing and ultimately eliminating racism is required.

HB2337 won't "fix" the systemic and institutional racism, but will help Oregon move forward on this critical journey. I am proud to also be a board member of Healthcare for All Oregon (hcao.org) who has endorsed HB2337 and advocates tirelessly for a more just and equitable universal healthcare system in Oregon and the United States.

Sincerely,
Mary Lou Hennrich MS, RN-retired
Portland, OR. 97215