



## The Oregon Coalition of Local Health Officials

### **Testimony for SB 1554**

Senate Health Care Committee

February 2, 2022

Good afternoon Chair Patterson and members of the committee.

My name is Jocelyn Warren, I'm the Chair of the Coalition of Local Health Officials, or CLHO, and the Public Health Administrator for Lane County.

I'm here today in support of SB 1554 which directs OHA to contract with a third party to collect data from OHA and local public health agencies, such as mine, along with other key system partners to analyze what went well and what went poorly – and why – during the pandemic response. The contractor will make recommendations for system improvements to ensure that we are better prepared to respond to the next emergency.

CLHO supports this measure. We understand that in order to prepare for the 2023 session, this report will be important for your decision making – particularly around investments. CLHO's Health Officer Caucus prepared a preliminary intra-action report late last year and counties such as mine are also conducting their own intra-action reviews in order to capture important information and lessons. As the people on the front lines of the pandemic for two years, we have a great deal of first-hand experience to share. I also need to emphasize this point, that the pandemic continues, and, in fact, this possible transitional period is especially stressful as locally we continue to manage testing, treatment, support for isolation and quarantine, communication and outreach, all the facets of our emergency response, while at the same time trying to plan and budget for services for the next fiscal year. In the midst of this very demanding season, our members are committed to participating in this effort in the expectation that their contributions will strengthen public health advocacy in the future.

I expect one major finding from this report will be that local public health has been woefully underfunded for decades. This will not be news to the state legislature. Knowing this and knowing, too, the risk of an under-resourced public health system, the legislature began investing in public health modernization in 2017. It seems prescient now that those initial investments were directed to specifically communicable disease control and health equity. The \$15 million dollars allocated in 2019 was not sufficient to bring the public health system up to modernization standards in either of those areas, but it did set us on the right path. We cannot underestimate the importance of that early planning and preparation for modernization. When the pandemic began, most local health departments had added regular staff in their communicable disease program (not all, funding for some health departments was not sufficient to support even one additional staff person). In my experience, staffing up during the pandemic was *the* biggest challenge locally and maintaining staff over time has continued to be incredibly difficult, for a range of reasons that I am sure the after action report will illuminate. When the legislature made the new \$45 million investment in modernization last year, about half of which was divided among the 32 Local Public Health Authorities, we local health administrators knew where the greatest needs were in our counties and how to maximize the funding we received. The good news is that public health modernization was tested in this pandemic and continues to be our best plan for securing the health and safety of all Oregonians.

We appreciate the partnership with Senator Steiner Hayward on this bill, and for her consistent support of public health modernization. The Senator is a great partner in the transformation of public health to address critical issues in communicable disease, environmental health, and prevention. Information and recommendations from the after action report will help ensure that we capture important lessons and are also positioned to lead the country in eliminating health inequities and mitigating the effects of a changing climate in our communities.

Thank you very much for hearing my testimony today.