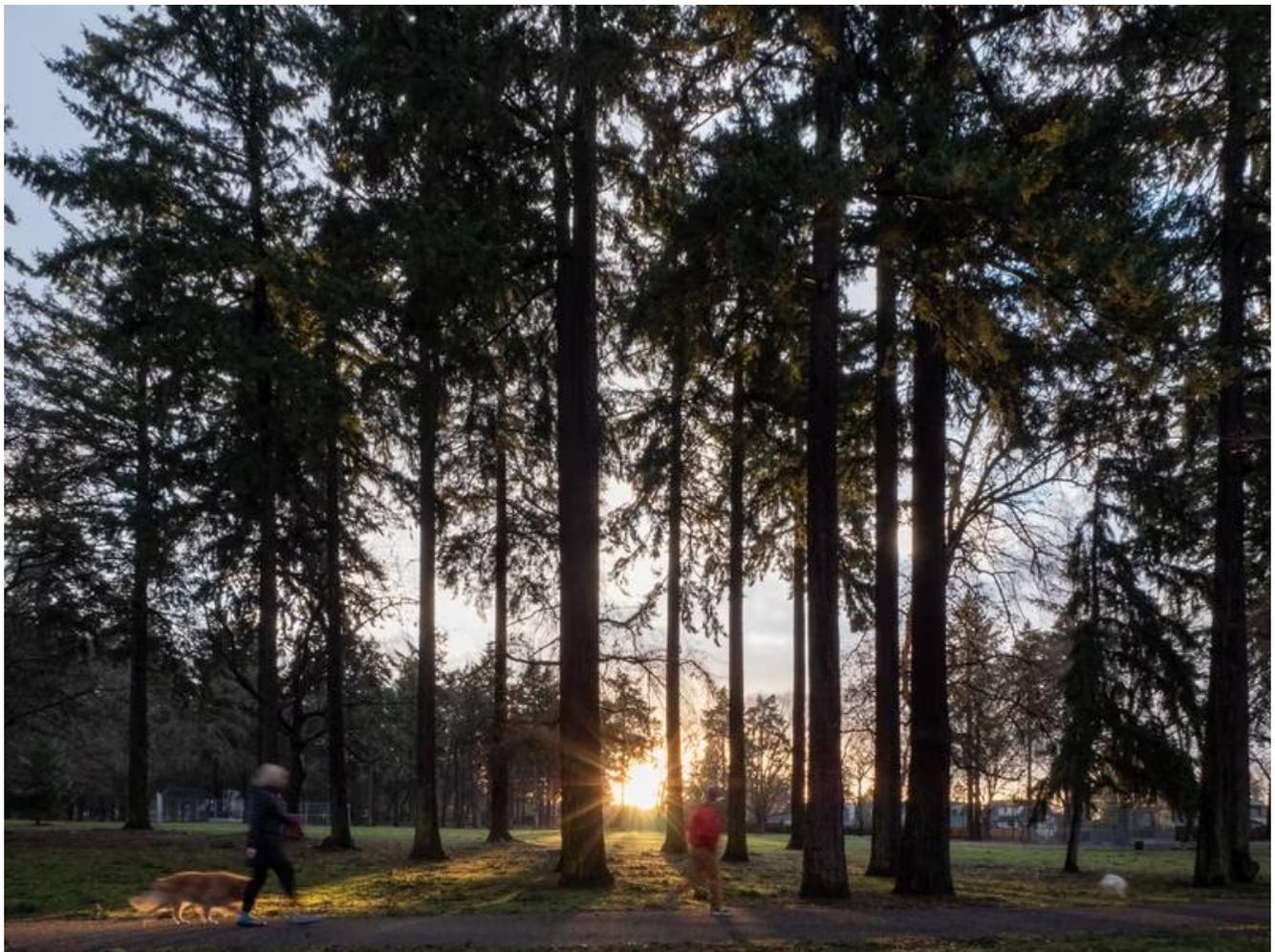




Bipartisan Bill Would Give People With Lived Mental Health Experience More Voice

Consumers often feel policy and budgeting decisions don't sufficiently represent their perspectives.

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DAWN: Sunrise in Wilshire Park. (Brian Burk)

By Nigel Jaquiss

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It's no secret that Oregon has struggled to deliver mental health services.

While [overcrowding at Oregon State Hospital](#) is the most high-profile issue, advocates have long felt that lawmakers and policymakers at the Oregon Health Authority make too many decisions that affect the lives of people experiencing mental

illness without considering the perspective of the people those decisions will affect—and do too little to engage consumers or inform them about the services that are available.

And a lot of people are affected: 250,000 or more Oregonians seek some form of publicly funded behavioral health services, according to Kevin Fitts, executive director of the Oregon Mental Health Consumers Association.

That group has long pushed for more input into policy, more reliance on peer support, and better information about how people can gain access to the various services that are available.

[Senate Bill 432](#) would require OHA to create a new community-based program “aimed at increasing and optimizing consumer involvement in planning and decision-making surrounding the access to, and the delivery of, behavioral health services in this state.”

Fitts says although the idea behind the bill is to empower individuals, some of the leaders of the state’s largest health care organizations, including Dr. Robin Henderson, director of behavioral health for Providence Health & Services, and Melissa Eckstein, president of Legacy Health’s Unity Center for Behavioral Health, support it, as do leaders of the state’s largest coordinated care associations.

The bill boasts sponsors from both sides of the aisle. The chief sponsor, Sen. Cedric Hayden (R-Roseburg), is vice chair of the Senate Health Care Committee, where the bill gets its first public hearing March 1. Hayden’s co-sponsors are two senior Democrats, Sens. Michael Dembrow and Lew Frederick (both D-Portland), who serve on the Joint Ways and Means Committee.

That’s important because although the bill has no known opposition, it will cost \$750,000 annually. Carrying a fiscal cost often sinks well-intentioned policy bills.

Fitts says the state funded a similar program 25 years ago, but budget cuts swallowed it. He’s hopeful that lawmakers, who upped spending on mental health dramatically in the past two years, will see the value in getting patients more involved and engaged so “that individuals with lived experience are at the forefront of service provision and that they have access to the resources they need to achieve recovery and resilience.”



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