

Submitter: Sherri L. Steele, CNO

On Behalf of: Santiam Hospital

Committee: House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care

Measure: HB2697

Chair Nosse, and members of the committee, my name is Sherri Steele. I am the Chief Nursing Officer for Santiam Hospital. We are a 40 bed, independent, acute care hospital, serving the Santiam Canyon.

I have been in healthcare for 40 years in various roles with 28 of those years as a nurse. I have served my country in the United States Air Force for 4 and ½ years. I have spent my career in service to patients, staff, and communities. I have always been grateful to be in a profession where I have the opportunity to make a difference every day.

I am submitting this testimony in opposition of HB2697.

There is no doubt that the unprecedented events of the past 3 years have taken its toll on all of us, but especially in the healthcare field. In Oregon alone, we experienced 3 events in 6 months, which we normally may not have seen in our lifetime: a global pandemic, a wild fire, and an ice storm, all with devastating effects.

In 2021, we saw many staff leaving, taking a hiatus, or cutting back hours from full time/part time to a prn status of 2 shifts a month caused by the complete lack of dependability on daycare and children being shifted to home schooling. Those who remained working took the brunt of what became continuous surges of patients with high acuity and mass staff call outs from illnesses and personal issues. We were all asked to keep doing more with no break in site. Healthcare employees have continued to rise to the need, but the overall resiliency is waning. This pattern continued throughout 2022.

In the background, paralleling this is the continual retirements of the aging workforce, 55% of RNs are age 50 or older. For the past 40+ years, the Baby Boomers and Gen-X generations have been the backbone of healthcare. In 2011, the first wave of Baby Boomers reached age 65. In 2030, the first wave of Gen-X will reach that same milestone. These two groups will continue to age and retire, and with them goes a strong work ethic, one of stability and reliability, and irreplaceable knowledge and skill. We cannot stop this natural process of aging and retirement.

The pandemic certainly exposed the cracks in healthcare, a system that was already struggling. Hospitals have been placed in the impossible position of being the “catch-all” of dealing with society’s issues; homelessness, behavioral health challenges, nursing facilities unable to take patients, and the list continues. We are all in agreement that changes need to be made in improving our healthcare system.

This week, an article came out about the University San Francisco Medical Center in California, a level 1 trauma center with 800 beds. The RNs are speaking out about the unsafe staffing with patients boarding in their emergency department hallways for days at a time. A second article came out in regards to UCLA Medical Center with the RNs speaking out about similar issues.

California already has mandatory staffing ratios, but it did not prevent those situations.

Why is that? Because they are struggling with the same situation as the rest of us: staffing shortages and high patient volumes.

HB2697 removes the ability for nurses to function at the top of their license, using their problem solving skills, adaptability, and knowledge to adjust in a given situation, especially in Emergency Departments where this is crucial.

The proposal of HB2697 as it is written is not just a nurse-staffing bill. It is a hospital bill. We are in a state of fragility in our healthcare system in Oregon. To place such strict mandates, which will require all Hospitals to hire more staff, when we all are already short staffed, will have disastrous effects and impede access to care.

I ask you to seriously consider the downward and unintended effects of this bill as it is written. We have much to fix in healthcare. I believe that we all have the same intention to care for our patients, our staff and our communities, and the commitment to continue to make positive changes.

I believe we can do that in a collaborative manner.

Thank-you for the opportunity to express my opposition to HB 2697.

Sherri L. Steele, RN, MSN



Chief Nursing Officer
Santiam Hospital