

TRAVIS NELSON
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
HOUSE DISTRICT 44
NORTH/NORTHEAST PORTLAND



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 5515

March 8, 2023

Co-Chairs Woods and Gomberg, and members of the committee,

I am Travis Nelson, State Representative for House District 44 (North and Northeast Portland). I am a Registered Nurse and the first openly LGBTQ+ Black legislator in the 164-year history of our great state. Committee members, I am here today in support of Senate Bill 5515. The Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) does vital work for our Oregon workforce. Not only do they help protect and uphold Oregonians' civil rights in the workplace, but they also oversee a majority of the apprenticeship pipeline for a variety of economic sectors. BOLI is seeking an extension and expansion of their current budget appropriation. Primarily they are asking for expanded funding to supplement their Civil Rights and Wage and Hour Divisions and to their Future Ready Oregon apprenticeship program.

Both the Civil Rights Division and the Wage and Hour Division at BOLI currently have an extensive backlog of cases, including complaints of workplace harassment and discrimination, wage theft, violation of meal and rest breaks, and other workplace protections. Currently, BOLI needs more than one year to investigate and resolve more than 73% of their cases and there is a current backlog of more than 1,000 Civil Rights cases alone. During the current biennium they have developed a successful pilot program that seeks to resolve cases through mediation – rather than litigation – and with more than 200 successful cases under their belt, they are hoping to make the program permanent.

BOLI is seeking to hire mediators and investigators to help work through the backlog of cases. Granting their budget request for this program would mean that more Oregonians' have their concerns addressed in a timely manner. This is especially critical for the claims involving wage theft and discrepancy. Many Oregonians live from paycheck to paycheck, and when they are waiting a year or more for a resolution to their case about wage theft, this can mean the difference between paying the rent or not. Ensuring adequate staffing in BOLI's Civil Rights and Wage and Hour Divisions also means that the department can begin to accurately track – and ideally penalize – employers with a history of harmful conduct toward their employees.

In addition to hiring more staff within those two divisions, BOLI is also seeking more funding for their Future Ready Oregon apprenticeship program. This program has helped BOLI expand the apprenticeship pipeline into essential industries within our state, including our burgeoning climate, education, and semiconductor sectors. As Legislators, we have heard repeatedly that we need more trained laborers in technical areas. BOLI's Future Ready Oregon program helps people successfully complete their apprenticeship program and then connect employers with skilled employees. This program is critical if Oregon is to remain at the forefront of multiple emerging industries and continue the growth of our economy.

BOLI is also seeking additional funding to add staff to their Fair Housing enforcement unit and their Human Resources department. They acknowledge that if they are to be *the* model workplace, then they need more staff to help them achieve this goal. Employees not just at BOLI, but across the state, deserve to have the best support available to them, and providing funding for BOLI's HR division is necessary for this to happen. I urge you to pass this bill out of committee.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Travis Nelson".

State Representative Travis Nelson
House District 44, North/NE Portland