

Date: March 13, 2023
To: House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care
From: Stephanie Phillips Bridges, Policy Analyst for the Urban League of Portland
Re: Support for Funding for Mental Health Facilities, HB 2544

Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Goodwin and Nelson, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Stephanie Phillips Bridges, and I am a Policy Analyst with the Urban League of Portland and I respectfully submit this testimony in support of House Bill 2544. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

According to federal data collected by the Kaiser Family Foundation, "Oregon has the 5th highest unmet need for mental health services, with more than 10% of adults saying they cannot get the help they need."¹ The Oregon Health and Science University's Behavioral Health Workforce Report to the Oregon Health Authority and State Legislature in 2022 reports "one of the biggest challenges Oregon faces is a shortage of mental health workers, a problem that was exacerbated by the pandemic."² The Oregon Health and Science University report states that "Medicaid is the single largest payer of behavioral health services in the U.S. and individuals with behavioral health conditions are more likely to be covered through Medicaid than other insurance programs. Within Medicaid, there are significant racial and ethnic disparities in treatment access. Nationally, Black beneficiaries with mental health conditions receive treatment at lower rates than their White counterparts (52.3% for White beneficiaries vs. 35.5% for Black beneficiaries). In the report, a service user who identifies as Black shares they find it easier to relate to someone who looks like them because they can understand the struggles they experience."³ The need for behavioral health providers exploded during the pandemic and up until today. This is especially true for Black Oregonians who often face further stigmatization when seeking and receiving mental health services in the Black community.

Oregon is dealing with a lack of mental health providers and facilities to provide adequate services. The Oregon Health and Science University's report shares that "career and educational barriers, and work environment stressors contribute to burnout and frequent turnover among behavioral health providers. The most common reasons for burnout included higher client acuity and complexity over time, large caseloads, and high administrative burdens. These issues can be more significant for providers in community-based facilities, particularly those serving under-resourced communities, tribal communities, and communities of color."⁴ Oregon legislators, health officials, and health care professionals have been aware of the shortage of providers and facilities. In May 2022, in the article "Oregon Mental Health Services to Get Over \$500M Spending Boost This Year", OPB reported there was a "\$517 million spending package split between 3 areas: grants to help behavioral health providers with staffing shortages (\$132 million), rate increases for service providers (\$155 million), and supportive housing and residential treatment programs (\$230 million)."⁵ The largest amount of funds was dispersed to supportive housing and residential treatment programs, but Oregon is still experiencing a shortage of residential facilities.

Last year, "the Oregon State Hospital announced in response to an order by a federal judge, they would send 100 patients back to their respective counties early as there are not enough beds for the people in need and most of the

¹ OPB, Oregon Mental Health Services to Get Over \$500M Spending Boost This Year, 2022.

² Oregon Health and Science University, Behavioral Health Workforce Report to the Oregon Health Authority and State Legislature, 2022, pg. 50.

³ Oregon Health and Science University, Behavioral Health Workforce Report to the Oregon Health Authority and State Legislature, 2022, pg. 15-17.

⁴ Oregon Health and Science University, Behavioral Health Workforce Report to the Oregon Health Authority and State Legislature, 2022, pg. 29.

⁵ OPB, Oregon Mental Health Services to Get Over \$500M Spending Boost This Year, 2022.



people being released were facing criminal charges but could not get services before they stand trial, so this means they go back to jail or into the community”⁶ as reported by Willamette Week. The Willamette Week article shares “in interviews, sources familiar with Oregon’s struggling mental health system say the new policy will not resolve the system’s long-standing shortcomings: there are simply not enough treatment options for people suffering from severe mental illness. The emergency release is the latest symptom of a system critics say is wholly inadequate for the mental health challenges Oregon faces. Oregon sits near the bottom in rankings of states’ mental health outcomes. Here, getting arrested is the only way for people to get treatment. And, when people fall out of the system, they often get arrested again.”⁷ Currently, Oregon jails and hospitals are filling the void of residential facilities, that provide specialized services and resources to individuals experiencing mental illnesses. In a 2022 article by the Oregonian, Providence Health & Services, Legacy Health, and PeaceHealth release a joint statement saying “the necessary components for safe and effective treatment provided at long-term care facilities — such as security, private rooms, kitchens, and physical exercise — are not feasible at hospitals that are also responsible for meeting the short-term acute care needs of their communities. As a result, patients left in these environments by Oregon Health Authority do not receive needed care and, in many cases, decompensate back to unstable conditions.”⁸ Hospitals have been strained due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mpox, and Respiratory Syncytial Virus outbreaks; adding long-term mental illness care for patients further overextends an already overstretched system. If we do nothing, our hospitals will continue to be overloaded and our fellow Oregonians' mental health care needs will go unmet.

We can address the shortage of residential facilities and take the burden off hospitals with HB 2544. HB 2544 will allocate funds from General Fund to the Oregon Health Authority for costs related to increasing the statewide capacity of licensed residential facilities serving individuals with substance use disorders or mental health concerns. Funding costs related to residential facilities will expand the care options for people experiencing mental illness and create more workforce opportunities.

Please pass HB 2544 to help address the mental health facilities shortage. Oregonians trust you to see the value in adequate mental health treatment access.

Respectfully,

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⁶ Willamette Week, A Federal Judge Has Ordered the Release of More than 100 Patients from the State’s Locked Psychiatric Hospital. No One is Sure What Happens Next, 2022.

⁷ Willamette Week, A Federal Judge Has Ordered the Release of More than 100 Patients from the State’s Locked Psychiatric Hospital. No One is Sure What Happens Next, 2022.

⁸ Oregonian, Hospitals Sue Oregon Health Authority Over Failure to Provide Mental Health Facilities for Patients, 2022.