

Health Department

March 16, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Education
From: Adrienne Daniels, Interim Director of Multnomah County Community Health Center
Alexandra Lowell, Manager of Multnomah County Student Health Centers
Re: Support for Senate Bill 549

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Weber, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share our comments in support of Senate Bill 549, which would authorize much needed funding for the school-based health centers that serve as a critical resource to children and adolescents across the state.

The Multnomah County Community Health Center is the largest public health federally qualified health center in Oregon, operating seven primary care clinics that serve over 56,000 individuals annually, as well as a specialty primary care clinic for HIV positive clients. We also operate nine Student Health Centers, which provide convenient access to comprehensive primary and mental health care services to any Multnomah County youth between the ages of 5-18. Our Student Health Centers are a vital resource for maintaining health and wellness within our community – similar to other school-based health centers that operate across the state.

Through a unique model of care, school-based health centers situate comprehensive services within, or adjacent to, the community settings where children and adolescents spend the majority of their time - and the places where they often present with health needs. We pride ourselves on the ability to provide care for a wide-range of health needs in a convenient and comfortable setting while being responsive to the distinct needs of youth - as our services are informed through collaboration with students and guided by representatives of our Youth Action Councils.

Because there are no out-of-pocket costs to families for the services that we provide, we rely upon a variety of funding sources to ensure we can deliver equitable care to any student that presents in one of our clinics. School-based health center staff devote significant effort in securing diverse funding from a mix of payers and other sources to ensure we can continue to operate within our communities and meet our students' needs. The services that school-based health centers provide are not only critical for improving individual health outcomes, but ensure that students are healthy and better equipped to learn and develop – resulting in long-term benefits not only for individuals, but also to families and the community as a whole.

Increasing the minimum grant funding allocated to school-based health centers, as well as creating a mechanism to adjust grants annually for inflation, will help clinics similar to ours across the state continue to operate services that the community has come to depend upon. Similar to cost of living increases, automatically taking inflation into account and adjusting funding accordingly will help offset the constant need to find additional funds to cover the rising costs associated with maintaining existing levels of care. This is a much-appreciated step in helping to ensure continuity for the important services that school-based health centers provide.

Additionally, the grant funding proposed in SB 549 will help expand the presence of school-based health centers in communities across Oregon and make necessary resources available to address the growing mental health needs we are seeing amongst our students. The pandemic has been difficult for everyone, but the mental health impact on children and adolescents has been particularly alarming. In 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts increased significantly for adolescents,¹ and the percentage of those reporting they feel sad or hopeless continues to rise – increasing from 28 percent in 2011 to 42 percent in 2021.² More than 1 in 10 youth in the U.S. are experiencing depression that severely impairs their ability to function at school or work, at home, with family, or in their social life, and nearly 60 percent of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment.³ Trends in declining mental wellness are even more concerning among American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian American, Black, and Hispanic adolescents,⁴ and disproportionate disparities and barriers to appropriate care persist for LGBTQ youth.⁵ Prevention and early intervention are critical to improving a variety of outcomes, from health indicators to educational attainment, and are pivotal, as well as cost effective, in achieving better health across the lifespan. School-based health centers are uniquely positioned to provide this care, and establishing grant programs to support mental health needs and enhance the trauma-informed approach across services is necessary to ensuring our communities are equipped with the resources needed to meet growing demands in the population that we serve.

SB 549 is a strategic investment in the health and well-being of our future generations. In addition to supporting the sustainability of school-based health centers, it will help provide a path forward to meaningfully addressing the health, mental health, and educational needs of so many of our young people at this crucial moment. The Multnomah County Community Health Center appreciates your consideration of this important legislation, and we strongly urge you to support SB 549. Please do not hesitate to contact Alexandra.Lowell@multco.us or 503.988.9751 if you have questions or require additional information.

Thank you,

Adrienne Daniels, MPH
Interim Director, Community Health Center
Multnomah County Health Department

Alexandra Lowell
Manager, Student Health Centers
Multnomah County Health Department

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

² https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf

³ <https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>

⁴ https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf

⁵ https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/assets/static/trevor01_2022survey_final.pdf