

TO: Oregon House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care

FROM: Leslie Yeagers, MA LPC, Family Heart Counseling, LLC

RE: Support for HB 2002

Dear Chair Nosse, Vice Chair Goodwin and Nelson, and Committee Members,

My name is Leslie Yeagers and I am an Oregon mental health provider/advocate working in Portland, Oregon. As a licensed professional counselor in private practice, I have many clients who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender exploring. Prior to expanding my private practice, I worked at Brave Space, an organization dedicated to serving the mental health needs of the TGNB exclusively. I provided mental health services through the Oregon Health Plan to people of all ages who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender questioning. As part of my work, I performed mental health assessments and wrote letters for gender affirming medical care, including hormone therapy, gender affirming chest and genital surgeries, and facial affirmation surgeries.

I am asking you to vote YES on HB 2002, because gender-affirming care is lifesaving care. According to the 2015 US Trans Survey, transgender people are nine times more likely to attempt suicide compared to the wider US population—but access to gender-affirming care can greatly alleviate this problem.

Oregon is already a leader on trans health care access: Since 2015, the Oregon Health Program and private insurers have covered certain gender-affirming care procedures. But gaps in coverage still exist for care that is crucial for many trans people, including electrolysis (hair removal) necessary for safety and surgery, and facial affirmation surgeries.

Most of my adult caseload at Brave Space included transgender women who could not afford, but desperately needed, facial feminization procedures such as permanent hair removal or facial reconstruction to alleviate severe symptoms of gender dysphoria. Unlike genital surgeries, facial and chest features are visible to the public. Without access to surgeries that alter appearance to match gender identity, my clients reported feeling extremely vulnerable to psychological, emotional, and even physical attacks and assaults while at work or out in public. Several clients have reported direct experience of being “clocked” as transgender and threatened due to their facial appearance while simply walking down the street. When attempting to access permanent facial hair removal or facial surgeries, their claims were automatically denied, requiring a lengthy appeal process that was also denied, despite well-documented risks and threat of assaults. In some cases, my clients developed agoraphobia or were too distressed to seek employment due to inaccessibility to facial affirmation surgeries.

HB 2002 will help close these coverage gaps in live-saving gender-affirming care access for transgender Oregonians. If this bill goes into law, as a provider I can provide much needed hope to my transgender clients that their surgeries will be covered, rather than have to set disappointing expectations of lengthy appeals and certain denials that only serve to heighten gender dysphoria. Heightened gender dysphoria contributes to crippling anxiety and depression, which significantly affects activities of daily living, such as leaving the house, obtaining employment, and functioning as a contributing member of society. As Oregonians, we all benefit

when are most marginalized populations are empowered to succeed. Gender affirming medical care is one critical avenue in which we can empower this highly marginalized population.

By voting to advance this crucial legislation, you will be making our health care system more equitable, and opening countless doors of opportunity for transgender Oregonians.

Please remember my story when you are voting on this bill, and please vote YES on HB 2002.

Thank you,

Leslie Yeagers, MA LPC & Marriage and Family Therapist Associate; WPATH member.