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House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care
Testimony in support HB 3320
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Chair Nosse, Vice-chairs Goodwin and Nelson, members of the committee,

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center (OLC), I respectfully request your support for HB 3320 to strengthen hospital financial assistance access and standards.

OLC is a non-profit organization that provides free legal help to people struggling to make ends meet. Our mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities in Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. We advocate for our clients and for the services and programs that help them to overcome poverty. Access to healthcare and issues of health equity are at the forefront of the needs of our clients. While many of our clients are covered by OHP, medical debt is still a serious concern for many.

Oregon has done a lot of work to increase availability of healthcare insurance for individuals, but true access depends on more than having insurance, it means being able to receive care without a lifetime of medical debt. In 2019, Oregon passed HB 3076, a groundbreaking charity care law that aimed to protect people from medical debt, make clear the expectations for non-profit hospitals and overall expand access to those most in need.

Despite Oregon's high rate of insurance and more recent charity care protections, there are a variety of reasons why medical debt is still a significant concern for OLC. A [recent study](#) from SEIU local 49 brings to light significant shortcomings with our current charity care law that fail Oregon patients with the greatest need. To start, financial assistance information for patients is difficult to find and understand on provider websites. Oftentimes, the application process is extremely time consuming and complex by, for example, asking applicants to itemize their estimated monthly expenses. While the law states that income is the only eligibility requirement, many providers still ask applicants to provide information about their assets without disclosing that this is optional. All these unnecessary challenges often deter people from knowing about medical financial assistance or seeking and applying for medical financial assistance.

Our clients are very low-income and struggle to keep up with medical debt. We are particularly concerned that there are still farmworker and immigrant communities who continue to be ineligible for healthcare for a variety of reasons and shore up significant medical debt that they should not owe. The vast difference between policies and accessibility of applications is a real

concern for low-income Oregonians. Clients who don't speak English often have language barriers to even understanding that charity care is available. There are easy fixes hospitals can make to help patients access their charity care options.

HB 3320 does several things that are vital for low-income Oregonians. It imposes new requirements on hospitals with respect to financial assistance and civil penalties for violation of those requirements. These include:

- Make information about financial assistance prominent, by featuring information on hospital website homepages and accepting applications online.
- Stop sending hospital bills to patients the health system knows are eligible for assistance. Though most hospitals could prequalify low-income patients for financial assistance and never even send a bill, many chose not to -- and press patients for payment instead.
- If a patient is found to be eligible for assistance, they will receive a refund for payments already.
- Increases transparency about hospital financial assistance practices by requiring annual reporting of standardized information.

Poverty shouldn't be a reason that an individual forgoes necessary medical treatment, and yet many Oregonians still must choose between receiving the care they need and paying for basic life necessities. Medical debt continues to be a significant concern for too many in our state. HB 3320 increases access to hospital financial assistance for poor and low-income Oregonians across our state. OLC requests your support for HB 3320.

Thank you,

Martha Sonato