



# Health Department

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March 21, 2023

Senator Campos, Co-Chair  
Representative Valderrama, Co-Chair  
Joint Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Human Services  
900 Court St. NE, Salem, Oregon 97301

Co-Chair Campos, Co-Chair Valderrama, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you all for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the Oregon Health Authority budget for Public Health. My name is Jessica Guernsey and I am the Public Health Director and Local Public Health Administrator for Multnomah County. I have had the privilege of working in local public health in Oregon for 22 years.

Investments in public health spending are clearly linked to declines in mortality and reductions in low birth weight, foodborne illnesses, and rates of sexually transmitted diseases, to name a few. Investing in public health also saves money in the long term: Every \$1 invested in public health yields improved health outcomes equivalent to as much as \$88 in expenditures saved.

The increasing frequency and severity of public health threats—climate change chief among them—make these investments all the more urgent. Emerging infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, are also becoming more frequent, thereby overwhelming the health system, weakening the economy, and causing significant loss of life.

The pandemic has underscored the critical role of public health to continue to meet the needs of our communities and our workforce. Understanding what is happening with the health of our communities and making sense of what is happening with communities are two basic tenants of public health practice.

If you don't know what is happening and you are not in conversation with community making meaning of what you are seeing, and you will not be able to respond -- this applies to our ability to gather and analyze data whether it is related to COVID-19, Mpox, diabetes, gun violence, drug overdose, and every other health issue we see.

Thankfully state investments in local public health were invested in these areas right before our first case of COVID-19 enabling us to have a regional COVID-19 data dashboard. Prior to Public Health Modernization investments in data infrastructure and community partnerships, we quite literally would be 'flying blind' in our COVID-19 response work. Needless to say this would have left us unable to understand basic disease transmission speed and patterns which are the underpinnings of how we understand and prevent severe illness and death-to put it bluntly many more people would have become severely ill and would have died.

The \$50 million in the Governor's budget will help maintain investments in the public health system implementation of the foundational capabilities and programs that have been identified over the past three biennia but falls short of the resources needed. Increased investments in public health modernization will allow us to build on the current work and expand to ensure all communities in Oregon receive timely, meaningful and sometimes life saving messages through relevant communication channels, with trusted messengers and in languages responsive to community needs.

Thank you,

Jessica Guernsey, MPH  
Public Health Director  
Multnomah County Health Department