

Chair Lively, Vice Chair Ruiz, Vice Chair McIntire, and members of the House Higher Education Committee,

My name is Isabella Sykes, and I am writing today to speak in support of SB 424.

I am currently a senior undergraduate degree student at Portland State University, working towards my Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences. I decided to attend college with intent to pursue a career in social services. As I near the completion of my degree, I find myself with a growing passion to use my degree to grow within the field of mental and behavioral health, as there is an ever growing need for these services, without sufficient providers to meet the demand that the citizens of the state of Oregon presents.

Throughout my college experience I have faced numerous challenges such as my own mental health challenges, the prevailing instability of the COVID19 pandemic, and general financial difficulties due to the current economy and trying to find a job that pays a livable wage. Another financial difficulty that has been especially prevalent in regards to my college degree is funding the costs of tuition and fees at the institution that I am attending.

Federal Financial Student Aid uses an individual's legal parent/guardian's financial status to decipher the amount of financial aid that the student qualifies for until the student is 26 years old. As my parents have worked hard to achieve the middle class financial status that they have, I have found it extremely difficult to use their finances to pay for my own college education, as their finances are not my own, and I cannot afford to pay for my own college tuition. My parents do not feel obligated to fund my college education, and understandably so, this has still made it very challenging to pay for college credits, even with the options that are available through the school.

I have recently started a job at a local mental health clinic, to gain valuable experience to apply toward growing in the mental health field, as a Qualified Mental Health Professional (QMHP). In order to earn a QMHP credential, I need to have first earned a Qualified Mental Health Associate (QMHA) credential and to have accrued a certain amount of hours registered as a QMHA, in order to qualify to even apply for the QMHP credential. The QMHP credential would allow me to earn a higher wage, as well as allow me to serve more community members with mental health services.

Although I already qualify to have a QMHA credential with the experience and schooling that I have completed, I have had to put my registering as a QMHA on hold for months because I am unable to acquire my college transcript from Portland State University, as I currently have a balance of under \$2,000 on my account, and I cannot afford to pay the balance in full. Portland State University requires one's balance to be at \$0 in order for them to access their own official college transcript. If I had access to my college transcript, I would be able to obtain my QMHP credential sooner, which would enable me to begin to make a higher wage sooner in the future.

This bill would allow me to serve the mental health needs of the community that I live in sooner in time, which would ultimately benefit our state as a whole. To put into perspective the current demand for mental health services in just the Portland metro area, the current waitlist to receive mental health services at the clinic that I work at, is currently sitting at 800+ people, or around a 1+ year wait. The need for mental health services in the current state of our community, state, and country is at a very high demand. Should this bill pass, there would be one less obstacle in place to work towards providing our community with the services that are necessary to their overall health and wellbeing. Thank you for your time and please support SB 424.