



To: House Committee on Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans

From: Mike Powers, President of SEIU 503

Date: February 6, 2024

RE: Testimony in support of HB 4045

Dear Chair Grayber, Vice Chair Lewis, Vice Chair Tran, and members of the committee,

My name is Mike Powers. I am President of SEIU 503. I am testifying in support HB 4045 to frontline workers at the Oregon State Hospital (OSH). SEIU 503 represents roughly 2,100 employees and over 80 classifications at the campuses in Salem, Junction City, and Pendleton.

I want to thank the Legislature for the investments made in mental and behavioral health services and workforce. Unfortunately, much more needs to be done to stabilize the workforce at the Oregon State Hospital.

Work at psychiatric care facilities like OSH is uniquely challenging compared to other work. Patients experiencing acute mental health and behavioral issues, particularly when staffing is not adequate, can be hostile toward staff and other patients. This results in physical injuries such as cuts, bruises, and fractures, as well as the mental trauma of a physical attack, especially for workers involved in patient restraint or high-security roles.

According to an internal SEIU January 2024 member survey with 85 total respondents, 64% of respondents reported having experienced a physical assault and over 80% reported verbal abuse. OSH workers not only provide psychiatric and nursing care but also provide cleaning and sanitation services to ensure that patients are in a clean and safe environment. Three in four workers said they have come in contact with the bodily fluids of patients as part of their job duties. When asked where within the secure perimeter the incidents took place, the respondents said classes, cafeteria, kitchen, corridors, assigned unit or while transporting and escorting patients. The responses are back by agency data.

OSH currently has the highest incidence of occupational injuries and illnesses of any industry in Oregon, making it the most stressful workplace in the state. In fact, in 2021, more than one-quarter of OSH workers filed a workers' compensation claim for an occupational injury or illness, a 42% increase from the previous year. As a result, in 2021, OSH staff lost over 720 days (about 2 years) as the result of workplace injuries.

Critical staffing shortages were an issue that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but which has only worsened in recent years. In 2021, officials requested support from the Oregon National Guard on two

separate occasions to supplement staffing at OSH. While the legislature has since allocated position authority to OSH so they can begin to fill those vacant positions, there needs to be a renewed focus on how the agency is recruiting for these positions.

Relying on the Oregon National Guard is not a solution to the problem of staff recruitment and retention.

Another sign that the state is not a competitive employer is the uptick in failed job recruitments in the last six months of 2022. The most common reason for a failed recruitment was an inadequate applicant pool, meaning these job postings didn't draw enough applicants. Oregon Health Authority had over 900 failed recruitments in 2022, more than any other agency.

In 2022, the Oregon Health Authority encountered a significant amount of turnover, evidenced by a 24% turnover rate, or roughly 800 individuals departing from the agency. The primary cause of the high turnover rates at OHA can largely be attributed to the high turnover rates at the Oregon State Hospital.

Due to chronic understaffing, OSH workers clock the most overtime of any workplace in the Oregon Health Authority with over 219,000 hours (equivalent to 25 years) in 2021. Overtime hours compound the physical and mental pressures of working in a psychiatric care environment while risking care quality and even workers' lives – the difference in mortality between people with job strain and without is equivalent to the difference between smokers and non-smokers.

Through the deliberative process, you will read the testimony from our members who work at Oregon's psychiatric care facilities. The written testimony submitted for the public record is meant to provide a context for the unique and hazardous nature of the occupations. For many, it is not easy to share their stories after moving on from psychiatric care or changing roles on the job due to an injury. Workers describe incidents resulting in serious, traumatic injuries with long-term impacts on their physical, mental, and spiritual health.

These benefits are vital for the well-being of OSH workers who must often retire early due to the immense physical, emotional, and mental toll while on the job. OSH workers have been an unrecognized and undervalued part of Oregon's healthcare system. Adequate staffing and improved retirement benefits would begin to provide the minimum recognition of their work.

I urge the members of this committee to support OSH workers by voting YES on HB 4045 Public Safety Workforce Stabilization Act.

Thank you,

Mike Powers

President of SEIU Local 503