

## **Draft testimony in support of the Oregon behavioral health workforce bill package**

Good afternoon Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the committee. My name is Folajaiye Kareem and I am a graduate student of the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Oregon Institute of Technology. I also work as a Behavioral Health Therapist, at Grace William Health Systems, in the same city of my university in Klamath Falls, Oregon. I am certified to practice as a Qualified Mental Health Professional-Registrant by the Mental Health and Addiction Certification Board of Oregon, and it is with great determination, enthusiasm, and a sense of purpose that I lend my voice today to give my strong support for the behavioral health workforce bill package, specifically the \$1 million investment for OIT to develop our behavioral health programs.

Oregon is facing a crisis when it comes to behavioral healthcare. We have the highest rates of mental illness prevalence along with the worst rankings for youth mental health in the nation. The pandemic has only worsened these long-standing shortages of providers, with many Oregonians unable to access the care they so desperately need.

I know firsthand the toll this takes, both from my work as a therapist and my internships in Nigeria where similar mental health challenges exist. When people can't get treatment, suicide rates climb, substance use and homelessness increases, and our communities suffer. But I've also seen how investing in workforce training and community-based care can drive real improvement.

The \$1 million for OIT in this package will be a critical down payment on expanding Oregon's behavioral health workforce, as outlined in the SB 1592 bill. With this support, OIT can increase enrollment across our rigorous mental health programs, fund additional faculty, upgrade training facilities, and provide tuition assistance to make this education accessible.

I can personally attest to the exceptional quality of OIT's training having gone through the program myself. With the legislature's support, we can leverage our strengths to graduate more of the highest-caliber mental health professionals that Oregon so desperately needs.

In closing, I urge your support for this investment in OIT and our behavioral health workforce. With your help, we can make meaningful progress addressing the

mental health and addiction challenges facing too many in our communities. Thank you for your consideration.