



February 14, 2024

Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Nelson and Goodwin and Members of the Committee:

My name is Zakir Khan, and I am a Government Relations Manager for Washington County and I'm here to testify in support of HB 4071 and the -1, -2, and -3 amendments. I will focus my testimony on the -2 and -3 amendments.

If you were to ever to travel to London and take the trains, you would persistently see the famed "mind the gap" signs everywhere. They are there to prevent injury by reminding you of the gap between the platform and the train. For too long in Oregon, we have missed the signs all around us to mind *another* gap – the lack of behavioral health supports. This gap shows up as a lack of behavioral health treatment beds, lack of sufficient workforce and lack of overall providers in our system of care. As dangerous as it is to stand too close to a London train, our failing behavioral health system has proven even more deadly and led to a tragic loss of life in all corners of our state. Today, we would like to ask you to embark on a different journey with our coalition and work to **mend the gap**.

This Committee has heard from constituents, advocates, local governments, and businesses many times over the years about our behavioral health workforce crisis. The –2 and –3 amendments to HB 4071 provide an avenue to increase our behavioral health workforce by allowing Oregon to join the Social Work Licensure Compact and Counseling Compact.

Staff play a critical role in the continuum of care, and licensed staff even more so. In Washington County, 60% of our crisis teams' staff are licensed and we are severely lacking applicants in the pipeline.

Employing more Licensed Professional Counselors and Licensed Clinical Social Workers means better outcomes and access to care across the entire continuum of care. Investments in educational programs and systems solutions are sorely needed, but we can't build that workforce tomorrow. What we can do, however, is become more competitive for workforce nationally and bring workers to us.

Passage of these two compacts through the –2 and –3 amendments ensures that we start helping Oregonians upstream before they ever need a residential bed. Counselors and social workers play a critical role in helping people get better before things get much worse. Further, joining the compact will make our state more desirable for students looking for somewhere to study and work within who want the flexibility of having the portability of their license.

I'd like to revisit what Rep. Bynum said in 2021 when she was working to pass funding for behavioral health supports through HB 2949, which at one point included an attempt to pass the interstate compact for counseling:

“The shortage of the necessary workforce that we need is only further hampered by the requirements that have been placed upon students here in Oregon that have often led to them flocking to other states to develop their mental health careers. We have no competitive advantage to recruit. Nor are we even competitive. Our system is built on the notion that our graduates can go anywhere. And they do. They are not staying here, nor are we able to attract enough talent to keep our own market competitive. Our standards might make sense if the outcomes and access were highly regarded, but we are ranked last or near last in the country in multiple mental health care categories according to Mental Health America.”

The problem that Rep. Bynum mentioned back in 2021 still exists today. This contributes to our understaffing, and impacts everything from health outcomes to health equity.

As the Oregonian noted on January 21, 2024, “Oregon has exactly the mental health system it paid for: anemic, underfunded, overcrowded and, until a recent infusion of new dollars, on the brink of collapse.” We urge the Committee to change this narrative. Oregonians deserve better access to care. Please pass HB 4071 with the –1, -2, and –3 amendments so that we can **mend the gap together**.

Washington County is grateful for the support of all our allies on these amendments, including but not limited to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Coalition of Oregon Professional Associations for Counseling and Therapy (COPACT), the Association of Oregon Counties (AOC), the Association of Oregon Community Mental Health Programs (AOCMHP), the Department of Defense (DOD) and the American Counseling Association (ACA).

Thank you,

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