

1/28/2025

To the Senate Committee on Health Care,

I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 161, which addresses critical workforce development challenges for Community Health Workers (CHWs), Community Paramedics (CPs), and local public health (LPH) departments in Oregon. This bill represents a much-needed investment in the health workforce and will help ensure that Oregon communities have access to essential services.

Over the last three years, I have worked for the Oregon Coalition of Local Health Officials as the Workforce Navigator implementing Healthy Rural Oregon, a three-year HRSA funded grant aimed at growing and supporting rural community health workers. We have provided funding for over 400 individuals to complete certificate programs such as Community Health Worker, Birth Doula, post-partum care specialist, Peer Support Specialists in addiction and mental health, EMTs, Paramedics. **These are the overlooked frontline workers supporting the more than 1.3 million OHP and Medicare members.**

As the Workforce Navigator on Healthy Rural Oregon, I connect with each of our participants, ensuring they have what they need to succeed. I listen to their challenges and help celebrate their wins. **Over and over again, I hear them say, “I could not have done this without this scholarship”, or “without payment for work I had to miss to take this course, I could not have done this. Thank you- I hope this doesn’t go away.”** Healthy Rural Oregon has \$1.5 million to work with, and while that does not always seem like a lot of money, to these workers, it has had a lifetime of impact. On behalf of all our participants, and future participants, I urge you to support Senate Bill 161.

But beyond individuals, we’ve also been able to increase the impact of these funds by working with local training organizations to provide our participants trainings. This has included leveraging our network and connections to help under-resourced organizations cut through bureaucratic challenges.

When we first met with Klamath Basin Behavioral Health in 2022, they had been trying, without success, to get a training program approved by the Oregon Health Authority, but didn’t know who to ask for help. As participants in the THW Commission and through our close collaboration with OHA, we were able to connect them to the right people, make the needed adjustments to their curriculum, and get it approved within a few months. Three years later, they have been offering this valuable training to their community while we’ve been able to provide scholarships for their participants. This has generated income for KBBH, career pathways for individuals, and home-grown resources for those struggling with addiction and mental health challenges in the Klamath Basin. This is a high return on our funds.

In Silverton, two un-accredited birth workers were referred to me. They wanted to become accredited with the state and be able to provide more advanced birth and mental health resources to their clients, but did not have the funds to do so. As we spoke, it became clear that they had vision. We were able to help with their training costs, but also helped them write a grant which enabled them to launch their own training center. Not only are they now the only Oregon-based accredited trainers for fetal birth positioning, they also lead parenting classes, pre-natal classes, and family peer support to rural Marion and Polk County families. This is a sustainable return on our funds.

These are just two of many examples of how we are leveraging funds beyond the singular support of an individual to provide long-term benefits to underserved communities across the state. Rather than siloing these funds into a single university or training partner that would have higher overhead costs and less statewide reach, our organizations can leverage our already built networks to drive long-term community investment.

Senate Bill 161 is a powerful workforce bill; and it's also an opportunity to tell these often-overlooked workers, these often-underserved communities, rural and urban, that their health, their careers, and their futures matter to the law makers in Salem; it's an opportunity for long-term community investment, and it's a good return on state funds.

This is an opportunity to support community health from a systemic to personal level, building more resilient communities, and more resilient people. **This is why I urge you to support Senate Bill 161, to vote yes to ensure that Oregon's healthcare and public health workforce is equipped to meet the challenges ahead.**

Sincerely,

Janessa Wells

Workforce Navigator- Healthy Rural Oregon, Oregon Coalition of Local Health Officials

Tumalo, Deschutes County Oregon