

January 29, 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.

CHWs are in high demand for the important role they play as a community link to available health and social services, facilitating connections to resources and improving access to and quality of care. Despite the demonstrated impact of their work, resources to support the training and development of these professionals is limited. This gap not only hinders access to care but also prevents individuals from entering and advancing within this essential profession. Senate Bill 161's proposal to allocate funding to the Oregon Community Health Workers Association (ORCHWA) will enable the expansion of training programs and provide crucial support for CHWs to serve the diverse needs of our communities.

Similarly, Community Paramedics (CPs) are an emerging provider type that has shown significant promise in reducing emergency department utilization, 911 call volume, and 30-day readmissions. These programs have demonstrated success in other states, but in Oregon, CPs lack the necessary support and resources to thrive. Senate Bill 161's proposed funding to the Oregon Mobile Integrated Health Coalition (ORMIHC) will provide the resources needed to develop and sustain Community Paramedic programs, improving health outcomes and reducing strain on our emergency services.

Local public departments, particularly in rural and underserved areas, are facing severe workforce challenges. High rates of burnout, turnover, and difficulty in recruitment were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for skilled professionals in these areas is critical, but many communities lack access to higher education, which further complicates recruitment. Senate Bill 161's funding to the Oregon Coalition of Local Health Officials (OR CLHO) will help address these challenges by supporting workforce development, training, and retention, ensuring that public health departments can continue to serve our communities effectively.

I believe that Senate Bill 161 offers a comprehensive solution to these pressing issues. By providing targeted funding to organizations like ORCHWA, ORMIHC, and OR CLHO, the bill will foster growth in essential healthcare and public health sectors, expand training opportunities, and provide much-needed financial support to trainees and employers alike.

I live in rural Central Oregon. Rural Central Oregon is underserved for health care and for mental health care. This issue is important to me because I am a certified Peer Support Specialist for Adult Mental Health and a NAMI Central Oregon volunteer who lives with mental health and physical health needs. This bill would help me, the rural Central Oregon community, and the community that NAMI Central Oregon serves.

I urge you to support Senate Bill 161 and take swift action to ensure that Oregon's healthcare and public health workforce is equipped to meet the challenges ahead. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Kitt O'Malley

Volunteer and Board Member, NAMI Central Oregon

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