

**Testimony Before the
Senate Health Care Committee on SB 531
Presented by Diane Solomon
February 11, 2025**

Chair Patterson and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of state funding for the Oregon Wellness Program (OWP). My name is Diane Solomon, and I am a psychiatric nurse practitioner and nurse-midwife, a PhD in nursing and more than four decades of experience. I am a current emerita member of the Oregon Wellness Program. I am here to emphasize the urgent “why” of sustainable funding for this critical program. The OWP is a proven, effective mental health initiative that provides confidential, timely, no-cost counseling services to Oregon’s healthcare professionals—services essential now than ever.

The Oregon Wellness Program was established to address growing mental health challenges faced by healthcare professionals across the state. Since inception in 2018, the program has provided a crucial lifeline to thousands of physicians, nurses, physician associates, and dentists grappling with stress, burnout, and the psychological toll of providing care in an increasingly strained healthcare system. The program is essential to not only keeping healthcare workers working—rather than burnt out and leaving the profession—but also saving our system countless dollars in new trainees and hires.

The program’s core principles are unique in mental health, and to our knowledge, unprecedented nationally:

- All services are confidential and not reported to licensing boards or employers.
- Clients are guaranteed access to an appointment with a licensed mental health professional within three business days.
- Sessions are free, eliminating any financial barriers to seeking help.
- Mental health professionals with unique experience treating healthcare workers ensure culturally competent, empathetic care.

The demand for OWP services has skyrocketed in the wake of the pandemic. In 2024 alone, OWP provided 2,581 one-hour counseling sessions to 611 healthcare professionals. Among them, 332 were Oregon Medical Board (OMB) licensees, receiving 1,331 hours of counseling, and 263 were Oregon State Board of Nursing (OSBN), receiving 1,191 hours of counseling. Despite ever-increasing demand, financial constraints forced the program to reduce benefits in mid-2024 from eight free, annual sessions per client to just three. This

difficult decision was made solely due to funding constraints in the face of increasing demand and effectiveness.

An independent OHSU study demonstrated OWP participants report significant improvements in professional satisfaction, burnout, and ability to provide high-quality patient care relative to their non-OWP-participating peers. These findings align with national research demonstrating healthcare worker well-being directly impacts patient outcomes, workforce retention, and overall healthcare system stability.

Despite demonstrated success, OWP faces ongoing financial instability. Licensing fees from professional boards cover only a fraction of the program's operational costs. Private funding from healthcare systems has dwindled due to financial pressures, leaving OWP without a stable long-term funding source. In 2024, emergency gap funding from organizations such as CareOregon and PacificSource temporarily sustained operations, but a permanent solution is absolutely essential.

Thus, we humbly ask the legislature to approve **\$1.6 million for the 2025-2027 biennium** to ensure continued operation and restoration of the original eight-session annual benefit to all OWP clients. This funding can ensure healthcare professionals receive the support they need to remain in the workforce and continue delivering essential care to Oregonians.

Conversely, consequences of failing to fund the OWP extend far beyond healthcare workforce issues. Burnout and mental health challenges among healthcare professionals contribute to increased turnover, early retirements, decreased quality of patient care, and stunted productivity. The cost of replacing a single physician, for example, can exceed \$250,000. Investing in the mental health of our healthcare workforce is not just the right thing to do—it is a financially sound, preventive strategy that can save the state countless dollars over time.

In sum, the Oregon Wellness Program is a vital, effective initiative that directly supports those who care for our communities. Ensuring its financial sustainability is imperative to maintaining a resilient and functional healthcare system in Oregon. I urge the committee to fully fund the OWP's budget request and protect the mental well-being of our state's healthcare professionals and the health of our citizens.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.