



## Caring for Oregon

February 12, 2025

**Senate Committee on Health Care**

**In support of SB 531, the Oregon Wellness Program**

Chair Patterson, Vice-Chair Hayden, and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon, my name is Paige Spence, and I am the director of government relations for the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA). ONA represents a diverse community of more than 21,000 nurses, and health care professionals throughout Oregon. Together, we use our collective power to advocate for critical issues impacting patients, nurses, and health care professionals including a more effective, affordable and accessible healthcare system; better working conditions for all health care professionals; and healthier communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of state funding for the Oregon Wellness Program (OWP). The OWP is a proven, effective mental health initiative that provides confidential, timely, no-cost counseling services to Oregon's healthcare professionals

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 ONA members who bear the 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 in ways that meet the needs of ONA's members:

- 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.

In 2024 alone, OWP provided 2,581 one-hour counseling sessions to 611 healthcare professionals. Of these, 263 were nurses licensed in Oregon, receiving 1,191 hours of counseling.

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 Oregonians.

Thank you for your time and consideration.