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10 Feb 25
Oregon Senate Committee on Health Care
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court St NE
Salem, OR 97301

Subject: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 837

Dear Senate President Wagner, Pro Temp Manning, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Joe Johnson, and I serve as the Eastern Oregon Regional Medical Reserve Coordinator, working out of the Baker County Emergency Management Office. I am submitting this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 837, which would expand the SERV-OR healthcare volunteer registry, improve worker protections, and allow for the use of healthcare volunteers outside of declared emergencies.

As someone deeply involved in emergency response and volunteer coordination, I have seen firsthand the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified volunteers, especially in rural Eastern Oregon. Our region accounts for approximately **51% of Oregon's total land area**—a vast geographic region requiring substantial resources to adequately cover. Currently, we have **175 volunteers** who collectively serve **50,075 square miles**, which would be a density of **1 volunteer** for every **286 square miles**. This ratio highlights the critical need for additional support and underscores the importance of expanding volunteer eligibility.

Post-COVID-19, we have struggled to find new volunteers. While there was a surge of interest during the pandemic, once the immediate crisis passed, active volunteer numbers dwindled significantly. This decline is largely due to healthcare workers already being overworked and stretched thin in our area. Many medical professionals are managing extreme workloads, making it difficult for them to commit to additional volunteer service. Because of this, it is critical that we expand volunteer eligibility to include community members who may not currently be part of the healthcare field but are willing to assist in emergencies. SB 837 would help address this need by removing barriers and encouraging more people to step up.

SB 837 directly addresses these issues by:

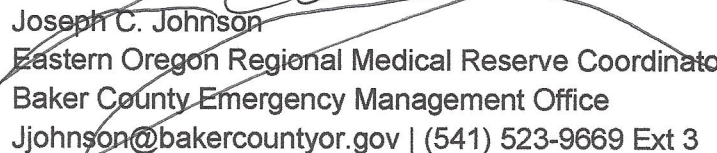
- Expanding eligibility for the emergency health volunteer registry, allowing more qualified individuals to serve.
- Permitting volunteers to assist outside of declared emergencies, which increases preparedness for public health crises, medical surges, and disasters before they occur.

- Providing worker protections, such as workers' compensation coverage, ensuring that volunteers can serve without undue financial or legal risk. Currently, if a response is not considered an official emergency, SERV-OR coverage does not apply, making it difficult to conduct functional exercises. This lack of coverage discourages realistic training opportunities and limits our ability to properly prepare for large-scale incidents. Expanding worker protections would remove these obstacles, allowing volunteers to train under real-world conditions without personal liability concerns.
- Strengthening Oregon's mutual aid network, allowing healthcare volunteers to provide support both in-state and across state lines during emergencies.

For rural communities like ours, these changes are not just beneficial—they are essential. We rely heavily on volunteers to fill the gaps in emergency healthcare, and any legislation that makes it easier for more people to step up and **safely serve** is a step in the right direction.

I urge you to vote in favor of SB 837 and support Oregon's emergency healthcare volunteers. Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide further details about the needs and challenges faced by our rural medical reserve corps.

Sincerely,


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