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February 20, 2025

Oregon Senate Committee on Early Childhood and Behavioral Health
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE
Salem Oregon 97301

Dear Chair Reynolds and Members of the Committee,

My name is Allison Myers, and I serve as Associate Dean for Extension and Engagement at the College of Health at Oregon State University (OSU). In this role, I lead the Family and Community Health Program of the Oregon State University Extension Service.

The AgriStress Helpline for Oregon is one of our programs and is a complement to our broad array of health promotion interventions. Extension Family and Community Health has been active in the state of Oregon for more than 100 years.

While we are best known for our nutrition education and food safety and security efforts, we also work in every county to prevent chronic disease, improve physical activity, social connection, and behavioral health, prepare for disasters and emergencies, and promote early learning and family well-being.

I support SB 779 and would be grateful to have your continued investment in the AgriStress Helpline for Oregon. SB 779 would make a one-time allocation of \$2,000,000 into the Rural Mental Health Fund – Endowment at the OSU Foundation, for the purpose of making sure the Helpline is available when needed, in perpetuity.

Oregon is burdened by suicide risk.

You are aware that the national non-profit advocacy organization, Mental Health America, uses a composite 15-item measure that continues to place Oregon nearly worst (50 of 51 in 2023) in the nation for a higher prevalence of mental illness and lower rates

AgriStress
HELPLINESM
for Oregon

 **833.897.2474**
call or text

of access to care¹. We also know from the Oregon Violent Death Reporting System² that deaths by suicide in Oregon have been higher than the national average since at least 2001. People in the farming, fishing, and forestry/timber industries are at particularly high risk (See Figure 1.).

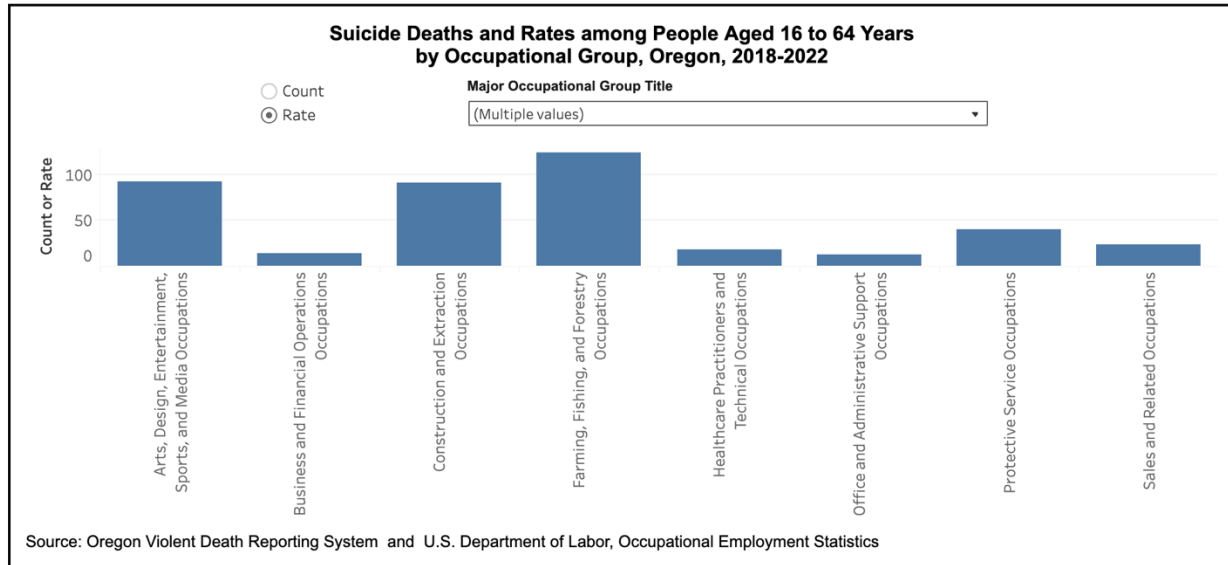


Figure 1. Suicide deaths and rates among people aged 16 to 64 years by occupational group, Oregon 2018-2022.

The AgriStress Helpline meets a need in Oregon.

Oregon’s agricultural and natural resource workers experience an undue burden of suicide risk – particularly rural men over the age of 49, loggers, commercial fishers, farmers, and ranchers. They have also known and worked with OSU Extension Service for more than 100 years. Our programs like 4-H, Agriculture and Natural Resource Extension, Forestry and Natural Resource Extension, Family and Community Health Extension, and Sea Grant are trusted resources.

The AgriStress Helpline for Oregon is a 24/7 crisis and referral line *specifically made* for agricultural and natural resource families. It fills a gap in our state’s suicide prevention infrastructure and our OSU team partners closely with Oregon Health Authority, who oversees 988 providers.

AgriSafe Network and VIALINK provide the line. AgriSafe Network, a national nonprofit, has a long history of serving the agriculture community. AgriSafe Network is an affiliate of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and a founding member of the national AgriStress ResponseSM Network, with a 20-year track record.

¹ Reinert M, Fritze D. & Nguyen T. (October 2022). “The State of Mental Health in America 2023” Mental Health America, Alexandria VA.

² Oregon Violent Death Reporting System:
<https://visual-data.dhsoha.state.or.us/t/OHA/views/ORVDRS/Suicide?%3Aembed=y&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y>

AgriStress Helpline was developed and launched by AgriSafe Network in 2022, because of the mental health challenges faced by the agriculture community, in order to provide dedicated and tailored access to crisis services. Oregon was the 7th state to join the service; today 11 states are active partners (Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Missouri, Montana, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming).

The AgriStress Helpline can be accessed in up to 160 languages with the help of interpreters. Every caller is offered a 24-hour call back. We know that confidential telephone helplines are an evidence-based strategy, and are used to support people at risk as part of a comprehensive public health approach to prevent suicide³. AgriStress Helpline offers a conversation that decreases suicide risk with interpersonal connection. Crisis lines work to help a caller feel less depressed, less overwhelmed, less suicidal, and more hopeful⁴. It is imperative, of course, that people know the crisis line is available and are motivated to call or text for help.

AgriStress Helpline staff are trained according to the standards of the American Association of Suicidology. Calls are answered by Lifeline credentialed suicide/crisis specialists trained in cultural competencies in agricultural mental health and factors affecting mental health (e.g., production, finances, injury, substances, markets, family dynamics, etc.). Call staff are skilled at providing emotional support, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention.

AgriStress Helpline staff complete hundreds of hours of professional development, including an overview of state-specific agricultural contexts, and ongoing quarterly training in agricultural stress topics. AgriStress Helpline staff are aware of state- or regional-level agricultural events that may impact call volume, for example a disaster, community tragedy, or reports of yields that may impact financial well-being. Staff knowledge of state-specific data on agricultural issues allows responders to better understand what agriculture community callers/texters are struggling with. Finally, any resources offered via AgriStress Helpline are vetted to meet the standards of the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems.

The Helpline is off to a good start.

The AgriStress Helpline for Oregon has been open for 15 months.

In that time, we have received 51 calls or texts from people in 25 unique Oregon counties (70%). We know from social network analyses that, for each person who dies by suicide, up to 130 others are negatively affected: Any number of calls is a good number of calls.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicide Prevention Resource for Action. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/pdf/preventionresourceinfographic.pdf>

⁴ Gould MS, Cross W, Pisani AR, Munfakh JL, Kleinman M. Impact of applied suicide intervention skills training on the national suicide prevention lifeline. *Suicide Life Threat Behav.* (2013) 43:676–91. doi: 10.1111/sltb.12049

Calls are answered in 30 seconds, and folks stay on the line around 10 minutes on average, longer than that if the person is in crisis, which has happened.

To grow awareness of the line, we have distributed more than 70,000 promotional materials at industry trade shows, meetings and events (See Figure 2.). We are grateful for the dozens of news and radio stories that have spread the word. With support from partners, we have surpassed 100K impressions from social media posts or advertisements.



Figure 2. Posters in English and Spanish.

2025 SB 779 will make the AgriStress Helpline available into the future.

Two years ago, I testified in support of SB 955, which was signed into law by Governor Kotek in July 2023 and gave \$300,000 into the Rural Mental Health Fund - Endowment at OSU Foundation.

So far, the \$300,000 endowment has generated 4% interest for current use, which is about \$15,000. We added to endowment, last year, on OSU's Day of Giving (Dam Proud Day) with 50 unique gifts totaling \$8,035.

We are grateful for the leadership of the Senate Judiciary Committee and Chair Prozanski for helping bring SB 955 to life. While SB 955 prompted an incredibly important conversation, it did *not* actually provide any *current use* funding to launch the line – so we got to work to scour our OSU budget and secure philanthropic support to pay the phone bill and produce meaningful promotional materials.

The Helpline itself costs \$67,596/year (\$5,633/month). That is the \$1/Oregon producer fee we pay to AgriSafe Network/VIALINK who offers the line, and sets the rate based on Census data. AgriSafe Network also recommends a 2:1 promotional spend (~\$135,000) to be sure people *are aware* of the resource.

Gratefully, we have secured \$194,274 in philanthropic donations for current use, from Roundhouse Foundation, Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization, Ag West, AWS, and an anonymous donor. (We have about \$67,000 in our current use account right now, and a pledge of \$35,000 on its way in the near future.) We have also invested significant resources from OSU Extension and the Colleges of Health and Agricultural Sciences.

SB 779 allocates one-time funds of \$2,000,000 to the Rural Mental Health Fund Endowment (Endowment) at the Oregon State University Foundation. The current use funds earned will ensure we can pay the monthly phone bill and purchase some additional support for promotional items. Our team at OSU will continue to meet communication and administration needs for the line.

SB779 would make the Helpline available in perpetuity for our ag and natural resource community, as we work to create a world where it is no longer needed.

I am happy to answer your questions – and to provide any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Allison E. Myers".

Allison E. Myers, PhD, MPH
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Program Leader, Family and Community Health
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