

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

I'm writing in support of SB 528. My name is Daniela Ortiz Mendez, and I am a Law Student at Willamette University, College of Law and a Member of the 2025 Civil Leadership Cohort with Western States Center. SB 528 will provide critical resources to RHECs so they can continue to support in reducing health inequities by identifying the most important issues impacting priority populations in underserved, rural regions of Oregon. By assessing these barriers through grass roots community engagement, they are able to uplift the voices of their communities by creating solutions to barriers through policy and systems change. The expansion of Regional Health Equity Coalitions will ensure that priority populations all over the state are getting their needs met.

SB 528 asks for the creation of 3 new RHECs to serve 6 currently unserved rural counties, the addition of 2 Full-Time Employees per coalition to manage growing workloads, and increased funding to cover essential programmatic costs like childcare, food, transportation, and interpretation services for underserved communities.

I support this bill because I have witnessed firsthand the transformative impact that RHECs have had and continue to have by serving our Oregon communities. I started getting involved as a community member with Oregon Health Equity Alliance, one of the RHEC's, in 2020, at the height of the pandemic. With them, I learned that health equity touches on numerous critical areas, from mental health and community building to addressing disparities that at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated the already underserved needs of my Latino communities in Washington and Multnomah counties.

Through organizations like OHEA, I have been able to actively participate in community work that supports individuals and builds collective leadership. For example, I've been able to be in groups with other Oregonians and contribute to projects, notably during the beginning of COVID, that have involved financially and emotionally supporting and connecting single mothers to immediate, low-entry resources to help with rent, therapy bills, and immediate personal needs in Washington and Multnomah counties - I was able to do this thanks to this RHEC, during a time where our government and many other nonprofits were slammed with work. Additionally, I've seen firsthand the work that OHEA has done to create connection and leadership opportunities for young adults across all of Oregon, **ensuring that we know how to do community work that isn't harmful and instead is rooted in health equity.**

Under our current administration, the demand for health equity initiatives has grown significantly as more communities face systemic challenges. **It is so important to show support to these organizations that are now being flooded with work because of the growing necessity of health equity needs throughout communities in Oregon, because health equity, or the lack thereof, impacts every body, and if we want to make it through these next few years in a good way, then we need to hold each other and support each other - the best way we can do this is by funding the organizations that are doing a lot of supporting, and expand reach to**

those areas where Oregonians are currently not being served. Without your sustained support for organizations like RHECs, we risk cascading failures in commerce, education, healthcare, and youth development - the negative impact of failing to support this vital work will be felt by our elders, our neighbors, our youth - by you, by me, by all of us.

The work is already being done by these RHECs, and all we have to do is fund it - SB 528 will allow underserved rural counties to benefit from these life-changing programs, and by funding essential programmatic costs such as childcare, transportation, food, and interpretation services, this bill ensures that no one person is left behind.

This resource is necessary for all Oregon communities - even those who are privileged, because as we are currently seeing with the reduction in produce and essential workers, the health and presence of our underserved affect us all - these resources will allow for an immediate increase in Regional Health Equity Coalitions capacity to support them. By supporting this bill, we are investing in a healthier, more inclusive future for all Oregonians where we can walk forward together, with support, and with community connection. I wholeheartedly urge you to vote yes on SB 528.”

Thank you,
Daniela Ortiz Mendez