



Chair Hudson, Vice-Chairs Fragala and Harbick, and members of the committee,

My name is Lamar Wise, and I'm the Political Director for Oregon AFSCME. Our union represents over 39,000 workers across the state in both public and private sectors, and we believe in economic and social justice for all Oregon workers and their families. In terms of behavioral health, we represent over 2000 workers in the non-profit sector and hundreds more through county governments Oregon AFSCME is currently neutral on HB 3129.

As you are well aware, Oregon's behavioral health system is in crisis. This crisis is driven in part by severe workforce challenges. Our state faces staggering shortages— the non-profits that we work with have reported a 41% gap in Certified Alcohol & Drug Counselors, an 86% gap in Qualified Mental Health Associates, and a 93% gap in Qualified Mental Health Professionals. Moreover, many behavioral health workers earn on average only \$26 an hour while managing overwhelming caseloads and enduring high rates of workplace violence. Employers have also reported vacancy rates reaching up to 30%, contributing to delayed care, worsening mental health outcomes, and a quadrupled in overdose deaths since 2019. Until we make treatment as easy to access as the harmful drugs on our streets, we will continue to lose the battle of healing our communities.

What we need now more than ever is coordination and partnerships. As this committee and this legislature deliberate on HB 3129 and investment in the behavioral health workforce as a whole, Oregon AFSCME would strongly suggest that you consider the following principles:

- **Direct Investments in Strategic Partnerships:** Allocate funds to create and strengthen partnerships that connect behavioral health providers, non profits, and educational institutions.
- **Direct investments that alleviate workforce issues as quickly as possible**
- **Direct investments that Leverage Additional Funding Streams:** Support investments that can draw down federal funding and attract private investment to amplify the impact of state dollars.

Oregon AFSCME, as a trustee in the United We Heal Labor management trust, stands ready to accept additional educational partners as we race to address the workforce crises. The United We Heal Labor Management Trust will be using a medicaid matchable mechanism that offers students a tuition-free experience that allows them to earn while they learn. We currently have a partnership with Western Oregon University and are a BOLI-approved apprenticeship program that aims to decrease the amount of time needed to attain higher credentials especially for QMHA's and QHMPs.

The House Healthcare and Behavioral Committee will be considering several strategies to address the behavioral health workforce shortage, and we believe the higher education institutions will be a crucial part of developing an overarching plan that connects students to their community and increases our capacity across the state. I ask that this committee consider the benefits of broader coordination while also thinking about HB 3129. Thank you.