



To: House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care

From: Oregon Education Association

Re: Yes on HB 2203 and HB 2024

Members of the committee,

**The Oregon Education Association is in strong support of HB 2203 and HB 2024.** Behavioral health workers in Oregon deserve safe conditions, fair pay, and supportive training, so they can deliver the care our loved ones and neighbors need.

**Our behavioral health system is failing both workers and patients:**

Every day in Oregon, people in crisis can't get the mental health care or addiction treatment they desperately need because we're losing the workers who provide this essential care – they simply can't afford to stay in jobs that put their own safety and financial security at risk.

Our behavioral health system is failing both workers and patients, especially those who rely on OHP for care. Facilities are dangerously understaffed, forcing workers to handle high-risk situations alone. Rural communities have few or no providers.

People of color struggle to find care that meets their needs and understands their experiences. As of 2020, [just 4.7%](#) of Oregon's behavioral health workforce identified as Hispanic or Latino, compared to about [14%](#) of the state's population that year, according to the [Oregon Health Authority](#). Other populations were also dismally represented. Just 1.3% of behavioral health workers were Black compared to 2.3% of Oregonians. We're losing experienced professionals every day because they can't make ends meet or stay safe at work.

**The behavioral healthcare workforce faces several challenges:**

- **CHRONICALLY UNSAFE WORK ENVIRONMENTS:** High-risk settings like prisons, clinics, and behavioral health facilities lack adequate security



and staff, leading to direct safety concerns for workers. Incidents in these areas have left staff feeling vulnerable.

- **OVERWORK AND BURNOUT = INCREASED RISK AND STAFFING SHORTAGES:** Mandatory overtime and excessive workloads increase burnout, time off, and resignations, creating a vicious cycle that workers can't get ahead of. Those who remain say increased exhaustion and despair increase the risk of accidents.
- **INSUFFICIENT MANAGEMENT AND SECURITY PRESENCE:** In many of these positions, management can work from home while workers must be onsite. Limited on-site management and security support result in delayed responses to incidents, especially in high-stress areas. Employees feel exposed and unprotected due to this lack of visible support.
- **SYSTEMIC SAFETY ISSUES AND POOR COMMUNICATION:** Staffing reductions and poor emergency communication exacerbate safety risks. Workers report that leadership often fails to prioritize or promptly address emergent safety concerns, leading to anxiety and a sense of abandonment in hazardous situations.

**HB 2203 and HB 2024 take important steps to address these challenges and help Oregon meet the demand for behavioral healthcare.**

**HB 2203 makes necessary improvements to our Behavioral Health system by taking action on the recommendations of the Joint Task Force on Improving the Safety of Behavioral Health Workers:**

- **Written Safety Plans and Protocols:** Behavioral health employers, mobile crisis teams, and emergency shelters should be required to develop written safety plans.
- **Worker Rights, Reporting Options, and Trainings:** Behavioral health employers should be required to provide safety trainings addressing certain topics, including the employer's safety plan, de-escalation techniques, as well as workers' rights and reporting options regarding safety concerns.



- **Support for Employer Changes and Compliance:** OHA should offer grants to employers to support risk assessments and to ensure work settings are safe. Any newly constructed behavioral health facilities receiving public funding should be required to include elements to enhance worker safety in its design. Oregon agencies should review agency rules for client and worker safety and develop related guidance for employers and increase coordination during enforcement of these regulations.
- **Staffing Requirements and Related Payments:** Behavioral health employers should offer a communication device to any worker who may be alone with a client or allow the worker to request a second person be present during a patient visit.

### **HB 2024 - Investments to Strengthen and Diversify our Behavioral Health Workforce:**

Invests \$45M into strengthening and diversifying our behavioral health workforce. HB 2024 provides \$20 million to OHA for a targeted reimbursement increase via incentive payment for these providers so workers are able to stay where communities need them most, serving the Oregonians who need it most. It will also provide training and career advancement opportunities.

The choice is clear: support our behavioral health workforce now, or watch more Oregonians suffer. We must take action to strengthen our behavioral health system and ensure healing is possible for all Oregonians.