



March 20, 2025

Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Javadi and Nelson, and Members of the House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care,

My name is Cynthia Ramirez and I'm a Policy Associate with PCUN, Oregon's Farmworker Union. At PCUN, we work to empower farmworkers and Latinx working families to improve their working and living conditions through community building, organizing, and policy advocacy. On behalf of PCUN, I am writing testimony 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 our workers and community members seeking out care. Our communities in rural areas are at higher risk due to the lack of healthcare providers in their areas. In a report done by the Oregon Commission on Hispanic Affairs, they reported that most of Oregon's Latinx population is located in rural and urban (and not frontier) counties. Between 15% and 36% of the population in Oregon's rural counties is Latinx, and between 13% and 27% of Oregon urban counties' population is Latinx.¹ Along with the lack of health care providers in rural areas and language barriers, our Latinx community is being left behind.

People of color struggle to find care that meets their needs and understands their experiences. Our Latinx community members are less likely to seek mental health services compared to other groups due to a multitude of reasons. This includes the lack of access to care, fear and stigma, too few multilingual, bicultural mental health providers, and a lack of culturally specific and responsive services are among the most significant obstacles reported.² This highlights the urgent need for culturally specific trained behavioral health workers to provide the best service to our communities. To ensure our communities have access to quality care, we need to start with protecting our behavioral health workforce to build a stable foundation.

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

¹ <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2021R1/Downloads/PublicTestimonyDocument/13839>

² <https://orlhc.org/latinx-emotional-health-collaborative/>

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. Our behavioral health care workers are vital to our communities and must be protected. 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.

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. While HB 2024 investments to strengthen and diversify our Behavioral Health Workforce.

We need to 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. On behalf of PCUN, we urge your strong support on HB 2203 and HB 2024.

Thank you,

Cynthia Ramirez
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PCUN