

Testimony in Support of Joint Task Force On Specialty Courts Recommendations in HB2632 and HB2633

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Dear Chair Kropf and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony. My name is Kathy Sevos, and I represent Volunteers of America Oregon, a behavioral health care agency that serves vulnerable individuals navigating recovery often while engaging with the justice system, including participants in three treatment courts in Multnomah County.

As an appointed member of the Joint Task Force On Specialty Courts, I am expressing my strong support for the Task Force recommendations aimed at strengthening and sustaining Oregon's specialty courts. These courts are not just a more humane alternative to traditional justice pathways—they are a proven, cost-effective model that benefits both individuals and taxpayers. We are hopeful that the legislation proposed in HB2632 and HB2633 will be reflective of these recommendations developed by a diverse group of stakeholders representing urban and rural Oregon communities.

Evidence of Success: The Cost-Effectiveness of Specialty Courts

It is important to emphasize that specialty treatment courts have been shown to be a cost-effective alternative to incarceration. National and state-level studies have demonstrated that these courts not only improve outcomes for participants but also save millions of dollars for taxpayers.

For instance, a 2011 federal study found that treatment courts resulted in a \$2 to \$1 cost-benefit ratio, translating to savings of \$5,680 to \$6,208 per participant. In Oregon, a statewide cost study on adult drug courts conducted in 2011 showed that the 21 specialty courts evaluated generated nearly \$120 million in net taxpayer savings. By helping individuals access necessary treatment, we reduce future costs associated with incarceration, recidivism, and long-term societal impacts.

Key Recommendations for Sustainable Improvement

However, for these courts to remain effective and sustainable, it is crucial that they are properly funded and supported with the necessary infrastructure. I would like to highlight several key recommendations from the Task Force that are of particular importance to us as treatment providers.

1. **Improving Application Timeline and Funding Cycle**

The current funding timeline does not provide reasonable time for awardees to negotiate and execute agreements prior to the service start date. This puts considerable risk and burden on direct service providers and partners. We recommend that the CJC reset the funding cycle, providing one-time temporary bridge funding for existing courts so that funding decisions can be negotiated, and contracts can be fully executed prior to the award start date.

2. **Enhanced OHA Billing Modifier for Specialty Court Populations**

Specialty court populations require intensive, individualized services, including evidence-based practices and coordination of care. However, there is an inconsistency in reimbursement for these enhanced services. We recommend that the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) create a billing modifier to reimburse specialty courts at an enhanced rate to adequately support these vital services.

3. **CCOs Adhering to Treatment Recommendations**

We urge the legislature to include a budget note instructing Coordinated Care Organizations (CCOs) to follow the treatment recommendations made by certified behavioral health providers. This would ensure that treatment plans, including dosage, duration, and intensity, are carried out as prescribed, ensuring better outcomes for participants.

4. **Funding for Court Liaisons**

We recommend the legislature allocate funding, beginning in the 2025/2027 biennium, for the role of Court Liaisons which bridges communication gaps between treatment providers and courts. These positions would replicate the model used for OJD Court Coordinators, offering immediate stability for treatment courts while longer-term funding solutions are explored.

5. **Modernizing Data Systems for Better Reporting**

The current data collection process for specialty courts is labor-intensive and outdated, leading to delays and errors. We recommend that the Oregon Judicial Department (OJD) engage with technology consultants to modernize the data-sharing system, improving the accuracy and timeliness of information that is critical for decision-making.

Conclusion

The Task Force recommendations offer a pathway to ensure that specialty courts continue to serve individuals effectively, reduce recidivism, and provide long-term savings for the state. By improving funding methodologies, enhancing coordination of care, and modernizing data collection, Oregon can continue to lead in providing effective, cost-saving alternatives to traditional justice pathways.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to any questions you may have.