

April 18, 2025

The Honorable Jason Kropf, Chair
House Committee on Judiciary

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Chair Kropf, Members of the Committee:

I celebrated my 51st year as a registered nurse last year. As one of just a handful of health system CEOs that are registered nurses, I bring a unique perspective to every aspect of my work. This includes tackling the issue of violence in health care settings head on.

Health care workers are uniquely and disproportionately at risk of workplace violence. A 2022 study reported that 44.4 percent of all nurses were violently assaulted during the pandemic. The same study documented chronic underreporting.¹ A 2023 study found that nurses experienced *1.17 aggressive events for every forty hours worked*.²

It is a felony to assault a paramedic or EMT in Oregon, but the same assault inside a hospital is currently a Class C misdemeanor.³ Thus, patients and visitors who knowingly and intentionally perpetuate violence in health care settings are rarely prosecuted. SB 170 allows a felony charge when there are two or more similar prior convictions.

Salem Health supports amendment of ORS 163 to make knowing and intentional assault of health care workers a felony charge on the first offense.

Over the past several years, Salem Health has been on a quest to reduce the incidence of violence within our hospitals and clinics. To support this work, we hired an outside security consultant to evaluate our facilities and provide recommendations to increase safety for staff, patients, and visitors. We have implemented those recommendations alongside programs developed here at Salem Health.

For instance, we developed and implemented a staff engagement and resiliency advocacy (SERA) program several years ago. Our SERAs round continuously in units at high risk for violence. They work to build greater staff resiliency and serve as learned resources, trusted advocates, and part of a

¹ Byon HD, Sagherian K, Kim Y, Lipscomb J, Crandall M, Steege L. Nurses' Experience With Type II Workplace Violence and Underreporting During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Workplace Health & Safety*. 2021;70(9):412-420. <https://doi:10.1177/21650799211031233>

² The Aggressive Incidents in Medical Settings (AIMS) Study: Advancing Measurement to Promote Prevention of Workplace Violence. Iennaco, Joanne DeSanto et al. *Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety*, Volume 50, Issue 3, 166 – 176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcjq.2023.11.005>

³ Oregon Revised Statutes. Chapter 163 § 165 (2023)

broader system of supports for staff and providers. They are there when staff are victimized by violent acts, helping sort through the aftermath. Implementation of this program has resulted in significant decreases in turnover among registered nurses in high-risk departments, declining from a high of 17 percent in 2022 to a low of .39% in February 2025. This figure includes our Salem Hospital emergency department – one of the busiest on the West Coast.

We developed and implemented Harmful Words and Actions (HWA), a program designed to support staff and providers in reporting *all* harms. HWA provides information on staff rights, as well as prevention and immediate response. It internally shares critical information on harms to which our staff have been subjected and provides practical methods to warn staff members of patients with a history of violence. Importantly, it informs our patients and their guests of our expectations while they are in our care.⁴

Our security consultant made a number of recommendations, which we have implemented. Among the visible changes are live security screenings and weapons detection at public entrances of our hospitals and clinics. We have instituted regular de-escalation and active shooter training across our organization in tandem with regular training and updates on our HWA program.

Combined, these efforts have resulted in a 35 percent decrease in the number of reported harmful words and actions as of February 2025.

Our staff are at the center of everything we do. Keeping them safe is our top priority. It should also be yours. I urge your support of SB 170.

If you have questions about our culture of safety and resilience, I encourage you to reach out to [Michael Gay](#) or [Ruth Miles](#) for more information.

Sincerely,


Cheryl Nester Wolfe, MSNRN
President and CEO

⁴ Salem Health Hospitals & Clinics. (2024). *Visitor Guidelines / Patient Visitor / Salem Health*. SalemHealth.org; Salem Health Hospitals & Clinics. <https://www.salemhealth.org/patient-guide/visitor-information>