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Written Testimony of
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Regarding
Support of SB 920, Accelerating the Promotion of Behavioral Health in Oregon with Health Extension

April 24, 2025

Thank you to Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Javadi and Nelson, and members of the House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care for considering testimony in support of SB 920.

I am the current steward of OSU's Coast to Forest program at OSU, which seeks to promote mental health and prevent substance use disorders across Oregon. Our team has been braiding and blending public and private funding to address behavioral health needs across Oregon (but especially in rural counties) since 2019. I led the implementation of *Community Conversations about Behavioral Health* in Umatilla County and supported the planning or evaluation in other counties. I have also conducted needs assessments in Oregon that indicate the continued need for supporting local leaders to collaboratively address behavioral health challenges.

In 2022, Dr. Allison Myers and I interviewed public safety and public health partners in 12 Oregon counties which are in the Oregon-Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) about drug overdose efforts and needs; more than half of these counties are considered rural or frontier. With the current level of the substance use disorders and in the middle of the fentanyl crisis, local partners were overwhelmed by overdose response and inadequate intervention/treatment options. Due to system overwhelm, they lacked bandwidth to do relationship building and planning activities to address system-wide issues and "up-stream" prevention, although they valued and desired such work. Our key takeaway was that our public safety and public health partners could use assistance in bringing all partners together to foster "a full-spectrum collaborative effort." This needs assessment enabled us to secure federal funding to implement *Community Conversations* in Umatilla and Malheur Counties.

During the Umatilla County *Community Conversations* held in late 2023, I listened as local partners discussed their unique challenges to prevent overdose fatalities, and to provide intervention and treatment in a system with many gaps and that was persistently under-resourced. The unique geography of the county made system coordination and transportation challenging. As each participant shared unique perspectives (which were often siloed), the group reached a common understanding of both local challenges and priorities for action. Participants galvanized around the need for affordable and available housing solutions not only for individuals with SUD but also to attract and maintain a qualified behavioral health workforce.

Also in late 2023, our team also facilitated *Community Conversations* in Malheur County; that group, which included county leaders in law enforcement, behavioral health, and public health agreed to three priorities for their county: a 24/7 crisis stabilization center, an agreement to share information and data between agencies, and a youth mentorship program. Two of our Malheur County partners testified to the Senate Committee Early Childhood and Behavioral Health. Because they couldn't be here today, I'd like to share some comments about that work:

“The data collected in our Community Conversations is being used to drive the work we are doing in the community.” (Lifeways CEO Steve Jensen)

“New partnerships have been formed that most likely would not have happened without the Community Conversations work. We continue to meet to try to make a difference in our community.” (Malheur County Sheriff Travis Johnson)

Our team continues to work with and in Malheur County; we recently held a listening session with local youth about the youth mentorship program they wanted. They are concerned about mental health and substance use, which they see in both peers and adults. We heard directly from them that they need and want a safe place to go, healthy activities to do, and adults who care about them. Our Malheur County and Campus Extension faculty are working with other local partners, in addition to the youth themselves, to create a program that will provide exactly those things.

Community Conversations about Mental Health can create conditions for local leaders to galvanize around locally grown solutions. In a context where state policies feel misaligned to, and imposed upon, them, reaching consensus around local created solutions feels empowering and restores sense of agency to both leaders and member of the behavioral health workforce (our team has seen this happen in real time). One of our team members has said, about Community Conversations: “Everybody in the room wanted to see a difference in their community. They want to see the behavioral health system improved. When there's that common goal, it is more motivating to embrace the conflict and move toward action.” (Abbey Martin, OSU Coast to Forest)

In conclusion, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. As others have indicated, we are not seeking funding with this bill, only your support to keep working towards improving behavioral health for Oregonians.