



*Testimony in support of HB 2125 (2025)*

Chair Taylor, Vice Chair Bonham, and members of the Senate Labor and Business Committee,

My name is Kate Suisman. I am an attorney at the Northwest Workers' Justice Project (NWJP). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important bill. We represent workers in low-wage jobs when bad things happen to them at work: when they are not paid, or are discriminated against for being in a protected class or are retaliated against for speaking up. Finally, we engage in policy advocacy and try to bring the important perspectives of workers in low-wage jobs and immigrant workers to these policy discussions.

We have all lived through major climate events over the past few years, like last year's ice storm and fire season, the heat dome of 2021, and the terrible fire season in 2020 where much of the state experienced levels of smoke that were literally off the charts.

During climate events, NWJP hears from many workers. Some ask about what PPE they need to be provided. Some are not sure if they will be fired if they miss work. Some ask for resources for food and rent assistance due to missed days of work. There are few resources available in these situations, and our response to workers' concerns about losing their jobs is usually "it's unclear." While the Legislature did recently pass a law known as "the right to refuse dangerous work," this likely does not provide protection when workers are unable to get to work due to climate or other hazards. Allowing workers to apply for and use unemployment during climate events will give workers and employers stability during severe climate events, and will provide workers much needed economic help.

The workers we represent often live paycheck to paycheck, and when they can't work because of climate events, they often can't pay for life's basic needs. In times like these, unemployment insurance should be a quick and accessible option for workers who qualify. Unfortunately, the "waiting week" built into our unemployment insurance program prevents workers from accessing benefits when they most need them.

As the National Employment Law Project explained in their testimony, many states have no waiting week and there is no technical or statutory reason why Oregon needs to wait 7 days before workers can get benefits they have earned. It makes sense for the unemployment system to respond to the changing needs of workers.

NWJP is strongly in support of HB 2125. We think it would be helpful to clarify what is meant by "severe weather" as used in the bill. While some events may clearly fall within the meaning of this phrase, some others may be less clear, like smoke from a wildfire that was caused by human activity. It may be clearer to say "natural disasters and severe weather, including but not limited to hazardous air quality and temperatures, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and other events."

Many business owners want to pay their workers during climate emergencies, yet are not making any money if their business is not able to operate. This bill would alleviate that stress on businesses, and would help them retain staff who may otherwise need to quit or find other work in a less hazardous location.

I would like to end with a quote from a worker in support of this bill.

“I worked for a Dutch Bros in Troutdale during the 2018 Gorge fire. Because we operate out of small stands with constant exposure to outdoor air, we closed due to the smoke and AQI. I lost a full week of work. When the snowstorms hit last year I was living on a large hill that made it impossible to get to the grocery store, let alone to cross the river and get to work. In both of these instances the lost wages negatively impacted my life. I dread the thought of it happening again.” - Raven Elizabeth Laine (Yakama Nation)

This bill is needed by workers and business alike. Thank you for considering my testimony and I urge your support of this important, common-sense idea.