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Democrats Ensure Essential Health Care Remains Accessible for All Oregonians

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the undoing of Roe v. Wade, Oregon Democrats stepped up to protect medical providers and access to critical health care

SALEM, Ore. - During the 2023 legislative session — as access to health care was at risk from provider burnout and extreme, anti-choice politicians nationwide — Oregon Democrats held true to the values Oregonians elected them to uphold and passed common-sense legislation that will ensure access to essential health care.

Today, legislators and advocates who championed these values and fought through an unconstitutional Senate Republican walkout to secure them, joined Governor Tina Kotek as she signed House Bill 2002 and House Bill 2697 into law.

Reproductive Health and Access to Care Act (House Bill 2002)

[House Bill 2002](#) is the Oregon Legislature's [response](#) to the U.S Supreme Court's disastrous *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that has prevented providers from offering necessary reproductive health care, allowed many Republican-led states to enact total abortion bans, and shut down abortion clinics, OBGYN clinics, and in some cases, entire maternal care wings of hospitals.

Oregon has long been a beacon for access to reproductive health and gender-affirming care and the Reproductive Health and Access to Care (RHAC) Act continues that trend. 72% of Oregonians, including 62% of rural Oregonians, [support](#) abortion rights.

"Abortion access is not an urban versus rural issue," **said Senate Majority Leader Kate Lieber (D - Beaverton & SW Portland)**, chief sponsor of House Bill 2002.

"Oregonians across the state agree that a person must have the right to make medical

decisions about their body without the government getting in the way. That is precisely what House Bill 2002 does."

"Democrats believe in protecting people's freedoms. In the wake of the *Dobbs* decision that meant protecting Oregonians from anti-choice politicians--both here and across the country--who are trying to roll back abortion rights," **said House Majority Leader Julie Fahey (D - West Eugene & Veneta)**, who was the chief sponsor of the Reproductive Health and Equity Act back in 2017. "As long as Democrats are in charge, Oregonian's reproductive rights are safe from Republican politicians and their far-right, extreme policies."

The RHAC Act preserves and protects access to care by:

- Keeping politicians out of the deeply personal health care decisions made between a patient and their doctor.
- Ensuring parents and guardians who are abusive, neglectful or absent cannot deny a minor access to an abortion, clarifying Oregon law in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision.
- Shielding health care providers from anti-choice, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-freedom laws in other states, ensuring they can continue to care for patients in Oregon. This comes in response to [increased threats](#) Oregon providers are facing post-*Dobbs*.
- Clarifying and expanding access to abortion and gender-affirming care by codifying that these medically necessary procedures are covered by insurance.

"This legislation is a victory for the fundamental freedoms of bodily autonomy and access to life-saving, medically necessary health care," **said Senator Elizabeth Steiner (D - NW Portland & Beaverton)**, a family physician and chief sponsor of House Bill 2002. "Oregonians elected Democrats to protect and advance these ideals in the face of an unprecedented attack on reproductive health care access in this country. I'm proud of what we were able to achieve with House Bill 2002."

"At the end of the day, this law simply clarifies that patients — in consultation with their health care providers — should be the ones making the decisions about their own health care, not politicians," **said Representative Andrea Valderrama (D - Outer East Portland)**, chief sponsor of House Bill 2002 and co-lead of the Reproductive Health and Access to Care work group. "This legislation builds on our efforts to remove barriers that keep people from getting the essential health care they need, including Black, Latino and Indigenous people, immigrants, people living with low incomes, trans and non-binary people, and people in rural areas."

The RHAC Act is the result of the RHAC work group [formed](#) by **House Speaker Dan Rayfield (D - Corvallis)**, following the leaked *Dobbs* decision in May of last year. The group was co-led by Senator Kate Lieber, Senator Elizabeth Steiner, Representative Travis Nelson and Representative Andrea Valderrama, in addition to over 80

stakeholders, including patients and providers. Together, the work group identified barriers to care and ways to address them.

Addressing Nurse Staffing Shortages ([House Bill 2697](#))

[House Bill 2697](#) addresses the state's hospital staffing shortages and will help providers deliver high-quality care for their patients. It sets nurse staffing ratios and minimum staffing levels, and empowers frontline health workers to have a voice in their workplaces.

[Nearly 70% of Oregon's nurses](#) say they are experiencing severe burnout, with more than three-quarters reporting that their work lives are dangerously stressful due to unsafe levels of staffing and poor working conditions. This has led to significant turnover in hospitals, further exacerbating staff shortages.

"The COVID-19 pandemic made clear what many nurses and health care workers already knew: for Oregon to be the healthiest state it can be, its health care workers must be supported. I am particularly proud of the fact that this will be the best hospital staffing bill in the country, getting rid of the break buddy system in hospitals and putting nurse to patient ratios in statute," **said Representative Travis Nelson (D - N & NE Portland)**, vice chair of the House Behavioral Health and Health Care Committee and a registered nurse. "House Bill 2697 is a meaningful step toward retaining health care workers while ensuring that every hospital stay is a safe one."

"Oregon has a responsibility to support the wellbeing of the nurses and health care professionals who work long hours caring for us," **said Senator Deb Patterson (D - Salem)**, chair of the Senate Health Care committee. "Standard nurse staffing ratios are a common-sense solution that will make sure the people in these critical positions are not experiencing avoidable stress and burnout."

Guaranteeing access to affordable, high-quality health care is a top priority for Oregon Democrats, outlined in the House's [Rebuilding for the Future](#) and Senate's [Oregon Works](#) 2023 agendas. During the 2023 interim and the 2024 legislative session, Democrats are committed to building off of this session's successes.

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