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Legislative Budgets to Address Urgent Challenges Facing Oregon's Health Care, Behavioral Health Systems

Investments would protect health coverage for low-income Oregonians, support nurses and behavioral health care workers

SALEM – In response to the toll the pandemic has taken on the physical and mental health of Oregonians over the past two years, the Legislature is on track to make investments that help keep low-income individuals and families insured and support our health care and behavioral health workers facing severe burnout.

“In my work as a nurse practitioner, I’ve seen firsthand the stress this pandemic has placed on our most vulnerable Oregonians and our already overburdened healthcare system, said Rep. Rachel Prusak (D-West Linn/Tualatin), chair of the House Committee on Health Care. “We’re taking action to ensure all Oregonians have access to care and on behalf of our health care workers who have performed heroically over the last two years.”

“As a clergy member who has spent many years advocating for health care access for low-income and disadvantaged folks, I know too well the struggle that Oregon families face to access and afford the health care they need to survive,” said Senator Deb Patterson (D-Salem), chair of the Senate Committee on Health Care. “This budget takes action to meet the needs of Oregon families in this challenging moment – protecting health care coverage for low-income Oregonians, supporting overburdened health care workers and focusing on building a brighter future by investing in Oregon’s long-term success.”

Protecting Health Coverage for Low-Income Oregonians: The number of Oregonians receiving health care coverage from the Oregon Health Plan (OHP) increased by 28 percent since the start of the pandemic. The federal Family First Coronavirus Recovery Act allowed the nearly 1.4 million members enrolled in OHP to receive continuous coverage while a federal COVID-19 public health emergency is declared. Once the public health emergency ends, the eligibility of all OHP enrollees will need to be redetermined within 12 months, and an estimated 300,000 Oregonians will lose their coverage.

The Legislature is working to deliver funding to ensure Oregonians have access to health insurance while they are moved out of the state Medicaid system. House Bill 4035 would allow the Oregon Health Authority to delay redeterminations for OHP members most likely to lose their coverage until closer to the end of the 12-month period. The bill creates a bridge health insurance plan that, if approved by the federal government, would provide coverage to individuals likely to lose their OHP coverage due to income fluctuations.

“This bridge plan should provide relief to the many individuals and working families across the state who need this coverage the most,” said Rep. Rob Nosse (D-Portland), chair of the House Committee on Behavioral Health.

“Too many Oregonians struggle to meet their basic health care needs,” said Senator Elizabeth Steiner Hayward (D-Portland), co-chair of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. “Developing a bridge health insurance plan for vulnerable Oregon Health Plan members addresses a major concern for families confronted with the prospect of losing their state Medicaid coverage.”

Bolstering the Behavioral Health Workforce and Supporting Providers: Oregon continues to face a behavioral health workforce shortage that has been worsened by the pandemic. The Legislature is set to significantly invest in growing this workforce by delivering one-time grants to providers of behavioral health services to ensure behavioral health workers and providers are paid more and improve access to care.

These grants, established through House Bill 4004, would allow providers to:

- Increase wages for behavioral health professionals;
- Offer retention bonuses; and
- Recruit and hire new behavioral health staff.

Additional funding will be set aside for an ongoing increase in Medicaid rates for behavioral health services to support the increased cost of providing care, with the goal of increasing access to behavioral health services throughout Oregon.

“We need to do everything we can to grow and support our behavioral health workforce to meet current needs and future demands,” said Senator Kate Lieber (D-Beaverton), co-chair of the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services. “We’re making transformative investments to address the challenges facing our state’s behavioral health system – from addressing burnout to creating pipelines for more Oregonians to find rewarding careers in behavioral health.”

“These are key steps toward addressing the behavioral health crisis in our state,” said Rep. Tawna Sanchez (D-Portland).

Supporting Nurses and Addressing the Health Care Workforce Crisis: New stressors and challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened Oregon’s shortage of health care workers. Planned investments by the Legislature would confront this shortage by addressing burnout among nurses and adding new health care workers.

House Bill 4003 would support the Oregon Wellness Program, providing counseling, education, and telemedicine services for Oregon health care professionals. The bill also extends the duration nonresident nurses can practice in the state on an assignment and establishes a nurse internship license through the Oregon State Board of Nursing.

An additional investment would provide new funding to the Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) to increase the number and diversity of health care graduates entering the workforce. The funding would help the university expand the capacity of its health care and pathway programs, and provide additional tuition assistance for health care learners from underrepresented communities.

“I’ve been a nurse for nearly 20 years and have never seen anything like what we have collectively experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Rep. Travis Nelson (D-Portland). “We’ll continue the work during the interim for a bolder policy in 2023. We need to ensure a long-term ‘nursing workforce pipeline,’ so that our nurses have every opportunity to effectively do their jobs.”

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