



Testimony Supporting Raising the Minimum Wage

Oregon Nurses Association

February 2, 2016

Chairs Dembrow and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 1532. My name is Chris Hewitt and I am here on behalf of the Oregon Nurses Association. With over 14,000 members, Oregon Nurses make up the largest portion of Oregon's health care work force—working in almost every health care setting from large hospitals to clinics, school-based health centers, and community-based public health.

This wide range and depth of experience providing patient care in our state has led nurses to the recognition that increasing the minimum wage is both an urgent matter of public health and a critical tool needed for enhancing patient outcomes. Recent studies strongly support this connection, including a recent 2014 report from the Oregon Health Equity Alliance that finds low-income Oregonians between 138 and 200 percent of the poverty line are now twice as likely as higher-income Oregonians to be uninsured. This disparity often results in an increased cost burden for our healthcare system through reliance on Emergency Room visits for care and a lack of access to early treatment for otherwise preventable diseases and conditions.

In addition, mounting evidence demonstrates that when workers are paid a livable wage, they are both healthier and happier in their lives. A 2014 report from the Minnesota Department of Health on income and health shows that wages strongly correlate to the likelihood of an individual developing serious health problems like heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and even premature mortality. Furthermore, the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine published a recent study that connects income as a key predictor in the prevalence of obesity, with low wages often precluding working families from consistently affording quality nutrition and exercise.

In light of this, it is infinitely more challenging for nurses and health providers to hope to deliver care in our communities with the goal of achieving quality health outcomes when many individuals are not self-sufficient and able to meet even their most basic needs. For staff nurses, it is in experiencing the all-too frequent anguish of discharging patients knowing they will face difficult odds getting well due to lack of continued access to care or unreliable housing. School nurses bear witness to this connection when caring for children with poor diet and who lack basic medicine for illness or simply a stable home environment to support their development. And Public Health nurses continue to grapple with the impact of these economic trends as a whole when working to address the overall health conditions of our region.

When families are able to afford important necessities like adequate food, housing and medical care, it is no surprise that we then see improved long-term health outcomes in our communities. Oregon's nurses support increasing the minimum wage to a livable rate as a critical step toward achieving this goal and strongly urge your action in passing SB 1532.