

Election 2022: Meet the candidates for Oregon labor commissioner

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Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Oregon voters will be choosing a key enforcer of workers' rights this year. Whoever wins the race for labor commissioner will be in charge of an agency with a \$35 million budget and more than 100 employees.

The Bureau of Labor and Industries enforces wage and hour claims and other worker protections. It also supports apprenticeship programs for Oregonians seeking job training and enforces protections against discrimination in housing and public places.

All Oregon voters, even those not affiliated with a political party, can have a say in the May 17 election for labor commissioner.

On that date, if a candidate for labor commissioner gets more than 50% of the vote, that person will win the election outright. But if not, the top two candidates will head to a runoff in November, according to the Secretary of State's office.

The state's current labor commissioner, Val Hoyle, in 2018 called it "the most important race you've never heard of." Hoyle, a former state lawmaker, is not seeking reelection because she is running for Congress in District 4.

Eight people are trying to become labor commissioner this year. These are the candidates:

Aaron Baca, reforestation company owner

Baca, of Cornelius, says that as a contractor and former electrician he understands both the struggles of small businesses and what it's like to be part of a union. When he relocated to Oregon from California, he says it was too difficult for him as a journeyman electrician to get qualifications to do similar work in Oregon.

"I would've had to start all over all over again as a journeyman, to go back into a four-year program," Baca said. He wants to emphasize job training.

"Making more resources available for basic training skills is crucial, I believe," Baca said. "And as well as, these training programs need to have (an) introductory year or introductory-style approach that's not so committal. If you're going to go into a trade, whether it be a plumber or electrician or whatever it may be, you're looking at four years' or five years' commitment right off the bat."

Baca said he has not managed a budget of BOLI's size but that he has worked as a manager.

Brent Barker, real estate broker

Barker, of Aloha, could not be reached for comment by deadline.

On his website, he says his campaign "will work with business and labor to encourage and promote high paying jobs to Oregon; protect workers' rights and improve Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) social media public service ratings." His website also says he wants to work with schools to "enhance" job training.

Cheri Helt, former state legislator and restaurant owner

Helt, a restaurateur and former state lawmaker from Bend, cites her experience as a legislator, business owner and school board member as qualifications. As a member of the Bend-La Pine School Board, Helt said she worked to pass Measure 98 in 2016, which dedicated state money to career and technical education.

"We now have a designated line item in our budget for career and technical education to high schools," Helt said. "But what we haven't done is really captured the pipeline from those career and technical education programs into high-paying jobs."

For example, she says, the state has committed to expanding access to high-speed internet, but there isn't an apprenticeship program for broadband jobs.

"I think the biggest piece of this is really starting to build the connections, right?" Helt said. "Because we have programs, you just have to find them and then there's not arguably enough of those programs. Right? So let's take the mystery out of it. Let's design this so that it's easy."

Helt also points to her experience running a business, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when businesses had to adapt to rapidly changing regulations.

She says she also wants to use her understanding of state laws to work on workforce housing issues. Oregonians across the state struggle to afford housing, especially in Bend, an outdoors town with a booming real estate market.

"I don't think I'm going to come with all the answers, but I'm going to come with the willingness to bring forward everybody, and get everybody sat at a table, and let's talk about how we can solve the problem together," Helt said.

Helt has been endorsed by Oregon's former Secretary of State Bev Clarno and former state Rep. Knute Buehler,



A ballot is placed in a secure drop box at a drive-thru location near the Marion County Circuit Court on Tuesday, May 18, 2021 in Salem. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL



Casey Kulla, a Yamhill County commissioner, is running for state labor commissioner. JOSH KULLA

of Bend.

Chris Henry, truck driver

At midnight on Sept. 9, 2021, Henry, who has been a Teamsters freight truck driver for 18 years, pulled off the highway to file to run for Labor Commissioner the first minute that registration opened.

That ended up not working, and he had to wait until he got home. He and one other candidate, Robert Neuman, filed on Sept. 9, according to Secretary of State records. The perennial candidate – who says he also has run for governor, treasurer, attorney general, Congress and the Tualatin Valley Water District – is now looking to help his fellow workers as labor commissioner.

"This was out of a desire that I had in order to help working-class people," Henry said. He wants to see a higher minimum wage, which he says he would use a statewide platform as labor commissioner to advocate for, and wants to require companies to provide diversity training.

Casey Kulla, county commissioner and farmer

As a county commissioner in Yamhill County since 2019, Kulla says he has worked with a range of people with varying political beliefs to improve government services, and wants to bring that skillset to statewide leadership.

For instance, when the state-mandated vaccines for health care workers, he helped the county come up with an agreement – over the course of many hours of discussion – that Kulla said was respectful of the workers but also complied with the mandate.

He thinks that BOLI can better inform Oregonians of their rights.

In recent years, the Legislature has passed new policies enshrining new protections for workers, like requiring overtime for farmworkers and creating a new program for people to take paid family and medical leave when they

welcome a new child or care for a sick loved one. BOLI has the responsibility for enforcing those rights.

"Most people have no idea that they have those rights, or that those programs exist," Kulla said. "And it feels really important for people to actually know that and then know where to go."

Kulla says he also wants the agency to step up its enforcement of apprenticeship programs and wage and hour laws. In early 2021, the Oregon Center for Public Policy published research finding that Oregon businesses paid penalties to the state in only 1% of cases where a worker's wage theft claim was found to be valid.

"If there's not a deterrent in the form of a penalty, then it's like a zero-interest loan," Kulla said.

He thinks the agency's process for penalizing businesses for violations should be clear and transparent.

And Kulla wants to figure out how to reduce the workload for the agency's civil rights investigators. The bureau gives equal priority to each case, and the pandemic has also resulted in high workloads per worker, Kulla said. He said addressing that might mean increasing the number of workers the agency has to do that work, but also could mean providing investigators with technological tools to do their jobs more efficiently.

Kulla, who runs a farm with his wife, Katie, growing produce, seed crops and pasture-raised meat, has raised about \$25,000 in 2022, and his endorsements include former Gov. Ted Kulongoski and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

Robert Neuman, worker from Baker County

Neuman, who says he works to help manage businesses, says his basic platform is that it should be easier for workers to apply for jobs. He believes the Bureau of Labor and Industries is underfunded and doesn't have enough workers.

"So it's this awkward agency that, 'All right. Need to do this,' but you can only choose so many things to pursue," Neu-

man said. "So which do you pursue for the most good?"

Neuman says he wants to motivate employers to post accurate job listings that include the qualifications needed for the job. He said there is still "some question about the enforcement mechanism" for that idea.

Asked if there was anything he would change about the agency, he said that he would wait until he was elected to decide what needed to be changed.

Christina Stephenson, civil rights lawyer

About 15 years ago, lawyer Christina Stephenson's father got sick with colon cancer.

Stephenson struggled to balance her finances and taking care of her dad.

"It was an awful time," Stephenson said. "And it was a time where I really had to guard my paid leave and kind of dole it out to make sure that I could still pay my bills, but also take a little bit of time off to help be a caregiver and be with my dad during that time. And I remember, really distinctly, being so scared to look at my paycheck because I'd taken a few days more than I could really afford to."

But after she got her paycheck when he passed away in 2012, she realized that she received bereavement leave as part of the contract she was working under.

Having long been interested in public policy, Stephenson researched the law and learned that other Oregon workers could be fired if they took time off to grieve a loved one. So she mobilized the members of her grief support group to advocate at the state capitol for changing the law in 2013.

Since then, Stephenson has provided feedback on legal language in bills that have become state laws, like the new program to provide paid family and medical leave to people who have just had a child or are taking care of a loved one, and a measure to promote equal pay.

If elected labor commissioner, Stephenson wants to continue to defend workers.

"I really think that the job is to make sure that as Oregon's economy is growing and changing, that the workers, the employers, the consumers, everyone who makes the economy run, that they know they have someone in their corner, someone who's looking out for them," Stephenson said.

Stephenson says she has a good understanding of what it's like to run a small business and worry about making payroll, too.

"We can make it so much easier for employers to do the right thing," she says. The division of the bureau that is meant to help businesses comply with regulations has just six workers in it, Stephenson said.

Stephenson says that overall, the bureau has half the workers that it did 40 years ago and she wants the agency to be strategic about how and where it spends money and enforces workplace protections. Part of that could involve using data to see which industries are least compliant.

Stephenson has been endorsed by Hoyle, the current labor commissioner, as well as unions from PCUN, the farmworkers' union, to the Oregon State Firefighters Council. As of April 7, Stephenson was by far the largest fundraiser for the race, with her campaign raising about \$109,000 this year.

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