

Nurses would get more support under Oregon legislative plan

By SAM STITES
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — In a rare show of vigorous bipartisanship, the Oregon House of Representatives unanimously approved a bill on Friday, Feb. 25, to support nurses and address the state's ongoing nursing staff shortage.

If approved by the Senate, House Bill 4003 would direct the state to issue nursing intern licenses to students meeting certain qualifications and allow them to practice under the supervision of a registered nurse.

It would allow nursing interns to receive pay and school credit if their institution allows, and it would expand programs supporting the mental health and overall wellness of nurses in Oregon's health care industry. It also extends a provision put in place by the state during the pandemic allowing emergency licensure of nurses for an additional 90 days following the end of Oregon's public health emergency declaration on April 1.

The proposal comes from Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn, who is a nurse. She worked with groups representing nurses and health care workers to craft the bill in response to staffing short-



The former OHSU auditorium space was converted to work as a routing area for people coming to the emergency department with respiratory symptoms that could be coronavirus-related. The area has intake, a waiting area that meets social distancing needs, triage and testing. By cohorting all patients with similar symptoms, medical workers can save PPE.

Oregon Health & Science University/Contributed Photo

ages and challenges nurses are facing that were identified before the pandemic and have worsened during the COVID-19 crisis.

"I have seen firsthand the stress this pandemic has placed on our already overburdened health care system, and I knew the Legislature had to take

action to avoid further depleting our health care workers," Prusak said.

According to a 2018 analysis by the Oregon Employment Department, Oregon was projected to need an additional 2,600 nurses each year over the next decade to replace those leaving the industry. Data

from 2019 shows the state's nursing programs produced only around 1,500 new nurses ready to enter the workforce that year.

The pandemic has placed additional pressure on schools to produce more nurses and hospitals to find ways to retain them.

The bill has the sup-

port of several statewide organizations representing nurses and health care workers, including the Oregon Nurses Association, Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, Oregon Center for Nursing and Oregon Primary Care Association.

Diane Solomon, a psy-

chiatric mental health nurse practitioner representing the Oregon Nurses Association, told lawmakers earlier this month that Oregon is "hemorrhaging" nurses.

"HB 4003 will help meet the needs of recruitment, as well as retention of a veteran, experienced workforce with essential skills," Solomon said. "Funding expansion of the successful Oregon Wellness Program to include nurses will absolutely offer intensely needed mental health care. In this way, nurses will be able to keep working without sacrificing their own health and mental health."

Prusak said she was proud to have shepherded the bill through the House with such widespread support, and she's confident it will have the same warm reception in the Senate.

Rep. Travis Nelson, D-North Portland — a fellow nurse and one of the Legislature's newest members — said the past two years have been devastating for nurses on the front lines fighting COVID-19.

He said this bill will make both short- and long-term progress in providing solutions for the nursing staff crisis in Oregon.

It now heads to the Senate for consideration. Lawmakers have until March 7 to pass bills.

Driving scenic Columbia River Gorge highway this summer? Get a permit

BY JAMIE HALE
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Looking to take a drive along the Historic Columbia River Highway this summer? You'll need a permit for that.

Timed entry permits will be required along the "waterfall corridor" of the scenic Columbia River Gorge highway between May 24 and Sept. 5, 2022, the Oregon Department of Transportation announced Tuesday.

Drivers will need to show their permits at one of three checkpoints set up between Crown Point and Ainsworth State Park. Those cycling along the highway, taking public transportation or on a tour will not need a permit. Other parking fees will still apply at recreation areas along the corridor.

Details, including how much the permits will cost and how many will be sold, are still being worked out, department spokesperson Don Hamilton said. People will be able to buy permits online in advance, though a limited number of same-day permits will also be made available.

The new permits are an effort to curb crowds along the scenic highway, which gives access to famous landmarks like the Vista House, popular hikes at Angel's Rest and Wahkeena Falls, as well as viewpoints at several other waterfalls, including Latourell Falls, Bridal Veil Falls and Horsetail Falls.

"This is a modest step to help address an increasingly serious problem," Hamilton said. "Everybody knows how bad the congestion has been getting in the gorge, especially in the waterfall corridor."

The area is known to fill with cars on sunny weekends in spring and summer, and people have been known to leave their vehicles parked precariously on the side of the highway when parking lots get full. In recent years, local sheriff's offices have begun towing cars parked illegally around scenic areas, especially in the Columbia Gorge and on Mount Hood.

In the Columbia Gorge, where land is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and Washington State Parks, as well as some local parks departments, officials have been gradually taking new measures to curb



Oregon Department of Transportation/Contributed Photo

Visiting Multnomah Falls, Oregon's tallest waterfall, by vehicle in the summer of 2022 could require obtaining a new permit. The Oregon Department of Transportation announced a new timed-entry permit system along the "waterfall corridor" of the Columbia River Gorge highway.

overcrowding and illegal parking.

In 2020, the Forest Service began a permitting system to visit Multnomah Falls during the busy summer season, offering 500 tickets for each one-hour time slot between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. Permits are typically waived for those who take public or private mass transportation to the Columbia Gorge, and services have increased as agencies have introduced new permitting systems.

While the new system may rankle some people

who are used to driving freely along the Historic Columbia River Highway, the Oregon Department of Transportation said the permits will ultimately create a more enjoyable experience.

"This is Oregon's crown jewel, the gorge, and we've got to make sure that we can provide access and we can provide a way to keep it a good and effective and safe experience for people," Hamilton said. "I think people are going to find a better and smoother experience in the gorge when we get this going."

Legislator salaries could exceed \$60k

Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — Oregon legislators would make almost \$63,500, if they vote to tie their salaries to the state's average wage, according to an updated report from legislative analysts.

That's \$6,000 more than what was originally calculated under terms of the proposed legislative raise.

A Senate committee advanced Senate Bill 1566

on Tuesday, Feb. 22, with proponents arguing that higher wages would improve diversity in the Legislature and reduce turnover. At that time, the legislative analysts said passing it would result in paying lawmakers \$58,500 beginning in January 2023. They now are paid slightly less than \$33,000.

An updated analysis posted Feb. 24 shows that the average salary in

Oregon in 2021 was actually \$63,464, so lawmaker salary would be set at that amount beginning in January 2023 if the bill passes.

Their new salary would increase every two years if average wages in Oregon increase, but it couldn't decrease more than 2% in a year, even if average wages fall. The Senate president and House speaker receive twice the salary as other lawmakers.

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