

Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester , and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing:

My name is Tim Woods, I am a resident of Portland and I am here today to testify in favor of LD 1711.

LD 1711 protects worker's access to court and ensures consequences for companies and organizations that trample on our rights. Whistleblower enforcement is a time-honored mechanism that allows working people to partner with the government to hold lawbreakers accountable, and thereby protect fellow workers.

In my case, the prospect of retaliation for bringing up safety concerns put my job, my career and my life in jeopardy.

In April 2018, I was working at Shalom House in Portland, a community-based mental healthcare facility for adults in transitional housing living with acute diagnoses of mental illness. It was there that one of my clients — a person who quite clearly showed a pattern of violent behavior toward others and toward themselves, well beyond the threshold of eviction outlined by Shalom House a — attempted to kill me, and was nearly successful.

This client ambushed me in my office, where he beat and strangled me to the point of semi-consciousness. While I managed to eventually escape, the incident left me physically and mentally traumatized.

After the incident, my urgent pleas for a variety of reforms were met with immense resistance from my managers. Some issues I raised included:

- Perpetual understaffing, which resulted in social workers working alone for multiple hours at a time, with minimal safety procedures in place in case of an incident.

- The safety of my particular office, with regard to the physical space/ office lack of emergency egress, or even a functioning door. I was told that I was demanding improvements beyond the agency's budget. And perhaps most importantly,

- The rationale for keeping the client on site. One Manager explained that the extreme acuity of this client's illness and history brought in a higher-than-average sum of outside funds (from various sources) for the program and the agency-at-large, and in one instance used the phrase "cash-cow" in reference to the client in acute psychiatric distress.

- The rejection of workers comp claims for therapy sessions necessary to my recovery.

After raising these concerns over employee and client safety, I experienced an arduous demotion process, whereby my schedule was shifted to a per diem basis, resulting in a loss of benefits. As the schedule became too irregular for my health and cost of living, I eventually left the organization.

Unfortunately, these kinds of egregiously unsafe working conditions are epidemic in the field of social work. However, social workers like myself have little recourse when it comes to advocating for improved safety measure. When I brought these issues to the attention of a lawyer, I was told the process for suing Shalom House would likely be in the range of 3-4 years, and require an excess of funding that would preclude me from pursuing legal action.

In LD 1711, the Department of Labor will begin an essential growth period, becoming more active in the community. The field of Social Work is rife with workplace violations, but the culture is such that these situations have become the norm. I encourage the passage of LD 1711 to begin the essential cultural change much needed here and in other fields by empowering workers and the State to combat organizations whose negligence often risks employee's lives.

Thank you for your attention.

Tim Woods