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CareOregon announces \$7.5 million cash investment in behavioral health provider network, part of larger effort to stabilize the system and improve patient experience

PORTLAND, Ore. — Today, CareOregon announced a \$7.5 million investment in behavioral health service providers, aiming for funds to be used as direct incentives to recruit and retain mental health and substance use treatment providers serving our region's most vulnerable patients. This funding is the first step of a multiyear plan to help stabilize and strengthen Oregon's behavioral health system.

"The events of 2020 amplified existing health disparities and brought to light challenges some communities face in accessing health services," said Amit Shah, Chief Medical Officer at CareOregon. "This is especially true for folks experiencing mental health issues or substance misuse—and importantly, for those that serve them. We're seeing unprecedented levels of provider burnout, of folks leaving the profession entirely due to the stress of high caseloads."

Known as the CareOregon Emergency Behavioral Health Workforce Stabilization Fund, this one-time \$7.5 million cash infusion will provide funding to approximately 25 behavioral health provider agencies who serve nearly 85% of the highest need patients served by the Oregon Health Plan in the Portland Metro, Northwest Oregon (Columbia, Clatsop and Tillamook counties), and Jackson County regions.

The goal of this funding is to help address the current symptoms of provider burnout, which leads to highly trained professionals leaving the field, resulting in higher caseloads for those who remain, and ultimately in less access to community mental and substance use treatment for patients.

"At CareOregon, we recognize that to have a strong, resilient behavioral health system, we must first cultivate a community of mental health and substance use treatment professionals who feel supported, valued and that they have the resources they need to best serve patients," said Jill Archer Vice President of Behavioral Health at CareOregon. "That's why we are making this investment in providers serving our highest need patients and creating capacity throughout the system for those with less acute needs. These providers are truly on the front line of our community's behavioral health crisis. If we'd like to move forward as a region and achieve Oregon's promise, supporting these providers must be a top priority."

"In discussing this plan with our Board of Directors, they were unanimous in recognizing the role we are privileged to play in the system to take immediate action," said Eric C. Hunter, CareOregon CEO. "The long-term solutions will require both government and private

sector commitment. This investment is meant to provide some immediate support to those on the frontlines. We're eager to get these dollars out, as we work to lean in and provide leadership on this issue."

CareOregon funding will be distributed to behavioral health provider agencies with the aim of passing funds on to providers in the form of retention bonuses, housing support, or other financial incentives to support these essential workers, many of whom make less working in community mental health than they could in other positions that require less training.

"The uncertainty of the times has fueled an increase in kids struggling with their mental well-being. Albertina Kerr's short-term residential treatment program and 24-hour access to mental health professionals quickly stabilize kids in crisis so they can return home safely," said Jeff Carr, CEO, Albertina Kerr. "However, due to a dearth of qualified Child and Family Therapists, we are experiencing significant difficulties in meeting the growing need for mental health care. Thanks to the generous support from CareOregon and others in our community, Kerr is creating a Recruitment and Retention Fund that will attract, develop, and retain qualified Child and Family Therapists."

In addition to this \$7.5 million investment in behavioral health providers, CareOregon is working on upstream solutions to strengthen the behavioral health ecosystem over the long run, including:

- Working with provider agencies to find opportunities to reduce administrative burdens, so they can focus on patient care
- Convening regional conversations about how to support our neighbors experiencing behavioral health emergencies (Portland Metro, Jackson County)
- Working to ensure that provider and member voice is part of conversations about behavioral health systems improvement in the regions we serve
- Engaging culturally specific behavioral health providers in conversations about how to co-design a payment and operating model that sustains and supports these providers, and best serves our community
- Advocating on behalf of providers in conversations with State and elected bodies
- Supporting our providers' efforts to increase capacity and exploring models that could improve payment parity across diverse providers

"When we think about the future of our region, I think that all of our neighbors want to live in a place where, regardless of income, anyone can access high quality mental health and substance use treatment," said Archer. "That's what we're building towards. Since we took on management of the behavioral health benefit, we've made great strides in working with partners to map out what's needed to stabilize and strengthen the behavioral health system. It's going to take time to get this right. We're so grateful for our partnerships with provider agencies, their frontline staff, and community organizations committed to creating a stronger, more resilient behavioral health system."

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About CareOregon

For more than 25 years, CareOregon has offered health services and community benefit programs to Oregon Health Plan members. Today, we support the needs of nearly 500,000

Oregonians through three coordinated care organizations, a Medicare Advantage plan, a Tribal Care Coordination program, a dental care organization, and in-home medical care with Housecall Providers. CareOregon members have access to integrated physical, dental and mental health care, and substance use treatment. We believe that good health requires more than clinics and hospitals, so we also connect members to housing, fresh food, education and transportation services. CareOregon is a mission-driven, community-based nonprofit with offices in Portland, Medford and Seaside, Oregon.