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Testimony to Board of County Commissioners

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Chair Kafoury and Multnomah County Commissioners

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the County budget. I am Lisa Naito of Naito Public Affairs and testifying on behalf of Telecare Corporation. Telecare is an employee and family owned company that is one of the largest providers of mental health services in the country, operating for over 50 years. In Oregon, Telecare operates a number of programs under the leadership of Kevin McChesney, the Regional Operational Director for Oregon. For your information, I am attaching a Snapshot of Telecare's programs in Oregon. In addition to the Assertive Community Treatment Team in Gresham, three of the residential programs are located here in Multnomah County. Today's testimony is on behalf of the Crisis Assessment and Treatment Program or CATC, which has provided stabilization services for people in crisis for Multnomah County since 2011.

Following the death of James Chasse in police custody in 2006, a need for services was identified by Multnomah County and the City of Portland for people experiencing a mental health crisis or stepping down from acute care hospital stays to a community setting. This led to the opening of the CATC in 2011 under an rfp process. Funding for the program has historically been provided by Multnomah County, although the City of Portland shared in the costs at one point until a negotiation was reached between the two jurisdictions as to the responsibility for the CATC as well as other programs.

Multnomah County and Telecare have reason to be proud of the services at the CATC. The CATC offers a safe and nurturing place for people experiencing a mental health crisis, such as people who are at risk of suicide. The CATC offers services to stabilize the client, treat their illness and assist them in finding stable housing. The target length of stay is 6 days. Multnomah County and the City of Portland had the foresight to build this program, which is a best practice model and has proven to be successful in reducing costly hospitalizations and incarceration of people suffering from mental illness.

The CATC was not designed to meet the need of a drop off center available to the police, and that need led to the development and opening of the Unity Center in January, 2017. Now that the Unity Center is fully operational, it is anticipated that it will replace emergency departments as the heaviest referrer to the CATC.

As a 24/7 facility, the costs to operate the center are largely fixed, with the need for consistent professional staffing to care for the residents. The program design was to have a bed available immediately for someone in a crisis, and not turn people away or put them on a waiting list. These costs go up each year, especially for staffing. During the nearly 6 year history of the CATC, Telecare has increased employee salaries by 2% each year, and there have been two competitive salary scale adjustments. Because of the minimum wage law, increased competition in the marketplace for behavioral health workers and the high cost of living in the Portland Metro area, there is significant upward pressure on salaries. During this same period, there has not been a COLA or rate increase for the program.

Because of decisions to increase wages to retain experienced staff, Telecare will experience losses for operating the CATC under the current proposed budget. A rate adjustment of 5.5% is requested as part of the FY 17-18 budget package to address this shortfall.

Your leadership and commitment to mental health services in our community is appreciated. While I am advocating on behalf of Telecare and its employees, I am also advocating on behalf of the clients of the CATC, clients who are not able to come and testify before you today. Yet with help and treatment, they will be able to recover and live successfully in our community. Telecare appreciates the difficult decisions you make on behalf of the residents of the County and thanks you for your continued consideration for these clients.