Ginger Bandeen

Good afternoon. Thank you for having me here today to speak to you about the important role that health information technology can play in improving mental health. This is an issue that is critically important for our field as we move into an era of greater integration and sharing of patient data to coordinate care across health system sectors. Behavioral health providers face unique challenges in this transition, and I'm here today to share with you some of these challenges – as well as the promise health IT holds for our field.

I would especially like to thank Oregon's Senator Ron Wyden for his support of many important behavioral health priorities in his role as Senate Finance Committee chair.

I served as the chair of the Quality Improvement Committee for the regional mental health managed care organization, Greater Oregon Behavioral Health for four years. In that role, I could really see the negative impact of poor data systems to the behavioral health field as a whole. In this consortium of rural and frontier counties, agencies had to depend on EHR systems that were inflexible and required outside resources for any modification. Many agencies were unable to produce even basic reports without months of wait time. This lack of available data makes it difficult to track and improve outcomes as a system, in addition to the negative impact on individual clients.

I was hired at Columbia Community Mental Health in the middle of their implementation of their first EHR. Previously, I was involved in the early stages of implementation in another community mental health agency in Oregon. I was the lead clinical person for our agency's implementation team, providing support to our IT staff as they developed the processes in the new EHR. I was involved in decisions around configuration, provided staff training, and helped with trouble-shooting. In order to make this implementation possible, I ended up also learning quite a few technical skills, such as coding and report-writing. These were somewhat unusual skills to develop for an LCSW, but it was necessary in order to get what we needed out of our system.

Due to our limited resources, I helped put together a network of other Oregon providers using the same EHR so that we could provide support and resources to one another. I facilitate monthly conference calls for this group, and we work together to implement new state mandated reporting requirements and to develop best practices. Through this network, I am familiar with struggles in other similar agencies. I am also involved in a regional Western User's Group for the EHR system.

At this point, our agency is in the process of a major upgrade to the EHR system, which is posing its own unique set of challenges. As part of this process, we have evaluated some of the competing products on the market for behavioral health systems. Based on that evaluation process, I have concluded that the market for behavioral health EHR's would be greatly improved if additional resources were available for providers to implement these systems.

While our agency was able to qualify for meaningful use incentives based on our few qualifying professionals, we are not eligible for the types of incentives available to hospital systems. I believe the

greater incentives that are available to the medical field contribute to stronger, more robust product development in the marketplace, and give those providers the ability to hire technical staff who can implement solutions successfully and with more efficiency. If those same incentives were available in the behavioral health world, I think we would see a vast improvement in the systems that are out there for us.

That's why I encourage all Members of Congress – and all of you here today – to add your support to the Behavioral Health IT Act. There are two versions of this bill currently before the Senate: one introduced by Senator Rob Portman and the other by Senator Sheldon Whitehouse. Both bills would take a great step forward for behavioral health by making our facilities eligible to receive federal incentive payments. This would allow us to be on equal footing with other healthcare providers in adopting and meaningfully using health IT – with the end result that we can better coordinate our activities with other healthcare providers, and most importantly, improve care for the people we serve. Ultimately, that is why we are all here.

Thank you.