

Hello Co-Chair Steiner Hayward, Co-Chair Rayfield, members of the committee thank you for having me here this morning. For the record my name is Brittany Hope, I have been a foster youth in the state of Oregon for the last 5 years and today I am here as an advocate with Oregon Foster Youth Connection. Full disclosure, I am also a staff member in the building. While I am a Legislative Aide for Senator Sara Gelser, I am here today of my own accord as an independent citizen. Senator Gelser has been aware that I will be giving testimony to this committee today but she and I have intentionally not discussed what I will be saying.

In my years in care, I have experienced severe instability in nearly every aspect of my life. In the last two years I have had five caseworkers and at times no caseworker due to high turnover and vacancies. I have had my current caseworker for three months now, and when I met him for our last visit, he didn't even recognize me. Not only does he not know my case history, values, goals or the events that are transpiring in my life, he doesn't know who I am as a youth with needs or a person. This is not at all specific to my worker, because of our caseworkers' unfamiliarity with their youth, caseworkers are often unsuccessful in getting us the things that we need that ideally would be provided by our parents. The person that is supposed to be my sole connection to the system that is charged with caring for me does not know my needs, so how can he or the system behind him properly support me so that I can become a happy, healthy, and independent adult? This is what heavy caseloads and high turnover of caseworkers mean for the children of our state.

While I was a minor and in the care of the state, I spent two periods of time homeless; the first for six months and the second for five months. Just recently, while still in the care of the system and considered a "very low needs" "child", I spent six more months homeless and waiting for a placement. The truth is that the lack of homes - not only placements - but HOMES available for foster children in our state is not only affecting the mental health, education and general well-being of these children, but it is causing us severe instability, insecurity, and even homelessness.

These are tough budget times. As you write this budget you will hear from business owners: adults with stable homes and lives. Currently, the foster youth of our state do NOT have stable homes to return to and our lives are chaotic and often at times near unbearable. The state is my parent and I and the almost 7,500 youth in care that couldn't be here speak to you today rely on YOU, the legislature to make the choice to support the Department of Human Services so that they can create for us the stability that everyone person and every CHILD needs. Please keep my testimony here and the well-being of your state's children in mind when you construct our state's biennial budget.