

Subject testimony - regarding SB 720

Good morning Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Senator Floyd Prozanski; Vice Chair Senator Kim Thatcher; and Committee members Senators Gelser; Manning; Fagan; Bentz and Linthecum.

My name is Kelly Okili and I am a Foster Care Certifier for the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) and a represented member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU Local 503). I and my fellow OYA employees are writing in opposition to some aspects of SB 720 which says it "Expands crime of official misconduct in the first degree to include certain acts by persons responsible for approving licensing or certification application for provision of care to vulnerable persons."

I have been employed at OYA for over ten years and love my job. But I must say that being a Foster Care Certifier is challenging, especially given the consistent lack of staffing, funding, and resources allocated to OYA Foster Care. I know my colleagues at the Department of Human Services, Child Welfare also struggle with overwhelming caseloads and lack of adequate staffing and resources. I have consistently found that the people who do this work are doing it because they want to help the children and youth in our communities. We are hard-working, dedicated employees who provide invaluable service to Oregonians. Given all of this, I'm sure you can imagine my disappointment when I read SB 720 which seeks to raise the penalties regarding the crime of misconduct for my colleagues and me from a Class C Misdemeanor to a Class A Misdemeanor. This means that even though we do not control budgets, staffing, or workload, we will be penalized at the same level as supervisors.

It is already extremely difficult to keep workers in these positions because of the overwhelming caseloads, lower wages than many of our colleagues here at OYA, lack of resources to meet the needs of the youth, families, and foster families we serve, and the vicarious trauma that we all experience helping children and youth in the child welfare and juvenile corrections systems. The last thing we need is punitive, misguided pressures put on us by well-intentioned lawmakers. I understand that there are major issues within our systems and this senate bill is an attempt to help fix some of it. However, there are plenty of safeguards and criminal penalties on the books already and no amount of statutory language will keep folks safe if the systems are not funded. Increased penalization will not help protect children, youth and families; it may actually act as a deterrent to good family policies and expediting solutions.

This bill also creates equity issues among state workers. It picks out certain workers (including certifiers) in an unfair way. For example, in our line of work the Juvenile Parole/Probation Officer (JPPO) is responsible for managing every aspect of an OYA youth's life, from where they are placed, whether they are safe, healthy, and have their needs met, whether they are engaged in treatment, school, vocation, etc. Why is it that this bill seeks to hold the worker who certifies this youth's foster home to a higher standard than the youth's JPPO? This is also true at DHS between the case workers and the certifiers. Aren't we all equally responsible for ensuring our children and youth are safe?

I am asking you all to consider the unintended consequences of this bill, the potential for this to be interpreted subjectively to the detriment of dedicated workers, and the inequity this bill creates among employees. As someone working on the front lines, I do not believe this is the solution you are looking for. I would invite lawmakers to spend time with workers like me to see what this job is like and to find effective solutions that benefit all involved.

Thank you,

Kelly Okili

This written testimony is supported by Christin Pickle, Chris Jensen, Sheila Kelly, Jered Schlunegger, and Daniel Xiong (OYA Foster Care Certifiers)