

March 7, 2019

TO: Senator Jackie Winters, Co-Chair  
Representative Carla Piluso, Co-Chair  
Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee On Public Safety  
FR: Bob Joondeph, Executive Director  
RE: SB 5541 - Oregon Youth Authority

Disability Rights Oregon (DRO) is the Protection and Advocacy program for Oregon that has provided legal-based advocacy services for Oregonians with disabilities since 1977. Among its other responsibilities, DRO is mandated in federal and state law to investigate complaints of abuse and neglect of individuals with disabilities and to monitor conditions in facilities that house individuals. As is well-known, more than 75% of OYA youth have a diagnosed mental health disorders. A majority has a history of substance abuse or dependence, 43% of females and 16% of males are victims of sexual abuse and 29% of females and 12% of males have exhibited past suicidal behavior. This is why DRO has paid close attention to conditions in OYA facilities and has been a member of the OYA Advisory Committee for many years.

DRO strongly recommends and supports adequate funding for OYA to address the complex and critical needs of the youth it serves. We particularly support the critical need for the mental health and other specialized services that are critical to the well-being and safety of youth, staff and the community.

Specifically:

- We support OYA's goal of adding three psychologists and a supervising psychologist to its staff.
  - Current staffing to provide psychological services is not adequate to meet youth needs, current workload, or existing performance measures. For example, all youth

- who enter OYA facilities are required to have a psychological assessment within 30 days — a standard OYA is unable to meet. A recent review found that it takes a minimum of 41 days to complete initial psychological evaluations —which are needed to identify appropriate housing and treatment plans for the youth.
- OYA psychologists are also responsible for specialized assessments that include ADHD assessments, risk assessments, developmental assessments, youth safety review coordination, “Second Look” reports, personality assessments, routine treatment consultations, as well as specialized assessments for transgender youth to determine if a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is present and if hormone treatment is indicated. Currently, specialized assessments must frequently be delayed or put on hold.
  - We support OYA’s goal of hiring three Qualified Mental Health Professionals (QMHPs) at MacLaren.
    - After hosting listening sessions at OYA’s MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in June 2018, Disability Rights Oregon recommended that OYA expand access to qualified mental health clinicians, and that housing units dedicated to youth with intensive mental health needs should have a dedicated clinician available seven days per week.
    - The number of youth at OYA dealing with mental health issues has increased in recent years, even as the overall number of youth committed to OYA has decreased. As a result, the agency’s current mental health staff-to-youth ratio is no longer adequate to meet youth needs.
    - Inadequate mental health staffing means that QMHPs are only able to serve as crisis workers, and are unable to address youths’ underlying mental health issues. This makes staff and youth less safe and teaches youth that they must be in crisis to receive services.

- Hiring three additional QMHPs would improve OYA’s ability to work with youth outside of crisis situations, and provide seven-day-a-week coverage for its specialized mental health units.
- We support OYA’s goal of hiring 10 Skills Development Coordinators (SDCs).
  - After hosting listening sessions at OYA’s MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in June 2018, DRO recommended that OYA train non-clinical staff to serve as support people for youth, even in challenging situations. SDCs are exactly the kind of staff OYA needs to provide this support for youth in crisis — and to train other staff in how to work with challenging youth.
  - Oregon is a national leader in reducing the use of isolation in its close-custody facilities. The negative impacts of long-term isolation on youths’ physical and mental health are well-documented, which is why we need to support OYA in its momentum to reduce isolation.
  - OYA needs a way to help youth who are in crisis without sending them to isolation. OYA facilities have developed “in-between” spaces where specially trained SDCs can help youth re-regulate their emotions, build skills, and come up with solutions to prevent future problematic behavior.
  - To sustain OYA’s pioneering efforts to reduce the use of isolation, the agency needs adequate staffing for its “in-between” spaces — staffing that is not currently allocated. Ten SDCs are needed to properly supervise these youth and provide them with much-needed services.

Thank you for the opportunity to support the funding of these critical needs.