



Oregon CASA Network
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TESTIMONY OF DEBRA A. GILMORE CEO, OREGON CASA NETWORK

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To: Chair Keny-Guyer and Members of the House Human Services and Housing Committee

cc: Sen. Peter Courtney, Sen. Betsy Johnson, Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, Rep. Tina Kotek, Rep. Dan Rayfield

Oregon CASA Network – the state CASA organization that supports and represents Oregon’s 22 local CASA programs – asks you to support HB4141 to increase OCN’s capacity to assure service quality and consistency across CASA programs statewide, and to boost local programs’ recruitment and training to advocate for the best interests of an additional 1,000 children who have been abused or neglected.

I’d like to talk about two “why’s” in support of HB4141. First, I’d like to address *why this request in this session*. Second, I’ll share a part of my personal “why.”

HB4141 enables recommendations found in the legislatively-mandated Public Knowledge report completed in July 2018. The PK Report’s purpose under that mandate was to help this Legislature, the Department of Administrative Services, and OCN make decisions about the future of Oregon’s CASA Programs.

HB4141 first requests \$141,740 to grow OCN’s human resource capacity. This request aligns with the PK finding that, “short or long-term state funding support for the OCN is necessary for the affiliated nonprofit structure to be successful.... Funds should be earmarked specifically for capacity building and support of the OCN” (2018, p. 36). At the time of the PK Report, OCN had no staff. It has since developed leadership, infrastructure, and a strategic plan for sustainable growth, and it is ready to support quality and consistency across CASA programs with this investment of state funds. A new position, in part, will manage OCN’s multiyear, multipartner initiative to increase diversity and infuse equity and inclusion principles into our CASA organizations and services – an initiative already supported by several private funders.

Leading Oregon’s CASA programs to provide a strong voice for every abused and neglected child statewide.

HB4141 also requests \$2.475 million, which would be allocated to all 22 local CASA programs based on the number of children in care in each county¹, and it would result in 1,000 additional children having a consistent, stable adult advocating for their best interest. This request aligns with the PK recommendation that “the state increase funding for CASA Programs in the short term (at least two biennia), with the intention of reducing that funding after a two-biennia transition period back to current levels” (2018, p. 35). The time is ripe for this infusion of funding. It would bring the state closer to meeting its own mandate of appointing a CASA volunteer to advocate for every one of the more than 11,000 children who enter foster care in this state each year. Less than 20% of current CASA funding comes from the state. And despite that local CASA programs have increased the number of children served every year for the last 5 years, the programs simply lack the funding to meet the need. Last year, 55% of Oregon’s abused and neglected children had to experience the chaos of state care without a CASA volunteer to advocate for their needs.

I promised a little bit about my personal “why.” Our son, Chris, came to live with us after he’d just turned 20. He technically aged out of foster care at age 21, and we adopted each other later that year. Chris entered foster care at age 7, where he spent the next 14 years without ever having a CASA volunteer to advocate for his best interests. We have each other now – and he will forever carry the scars of spending more than a decade languishing in a system with no one advocating for his needs.

Studies have shown that children with a CASA volunteer spend less time in foster care, are less likely to return to foster care, are less likely to demonstrate poor conduct in school, and are more likely to pass all courses in school. A 2017 study estimated the annual national savings from spending less time in foster care and not returning to care to be over \$800 million. Giving every child who has experienced the trauma of abuse or neglect the ability to be safe, have necessary supports, and to thrive through the advocacy of caring, consistent volunteers is an investment in Oregon’s future.

Thank you for your consideration and support.

¹ Based on a PK recommendation, the CASA programs spent a year and a half working to equitably update their outdated allocation formula, and DAS adopted the new formula this past year. The new formula uses a rolling, 3-year average of the number of children in foster care by county, and it assures an annual base for each county.