

February 1, 2020

Dear Members of the House Committee on Human Services,

I am writing to share information regarding the impact of HB4120 in the hopes that you will consider my testimony in your decision to move the bill forward. I am a professor at Western Oregon University and, along with a critical community member who serves as my co-chair, I run a program called Fostering Success. Portland Community College has a similar program and is, to my knowledge, the only other higher education institution in Oregon working explicitly to serve the foster student population with targeted services.

Fostering Success reaches out to students when they are teens in high school and introduces them to college. We make sure they understand the challenges that transition entails and help them navigate the world of higher education. We anticipate the barriers, and then address them when they inevitably occur, in order to help students from foster care backgrounds be successful and find security as adults. We are the higher education off-ramp from the foster care-to-prison pipeline that legislators and corrections professionals know all too well. The program at Western Oregon University currently receives no state or institutional funding. We were able to launch our initiative five years ago thanks to a strategic planning grant from DHS but we operate on a shoe-string budget by fundraising and building donor relations. My time, and that of my co-chair and our “foster liaisons” (staff and faculty volunteers who’ve undergone additional training) is donated; we do this on top of and outside of our “regular” jobs. We do it because we know it makes a difference.

I know with some certainty that we’re successful for two reasons: 1) foster kids are resilient and capable. 2) Independent Living Providers do an amazing job. Did I mention that my co-chair is not a WOU employee? She is the local ILP at Polk Youth Services and a WOU alumna. Without her expertise in all matters related to financial aid, Oregon Opportunity Grants, federal Chafee dollars, DHS support grants, university registration holds, judicial affairs, housing contracts, financial literacy programs, medical withdrawals, counseling and emergency health services, and I could continue on . . . Without her incredible knowledge and expertise, there would be no Fostering Success program at WOU. Oh, and she organizes a multi-day summer conference (“the DREAM conference”) for over 100 foster teens that encourages them to pursue career, vocational, and educational opportunities. Shannon Simich is single-handedly changing the trajectory of the lives of Polk County foster youth. Without ILPs, PCC would likewise not be the gateway to a better future for so many foster teens and adults in Multnomah County.

You’ll probably hear a lot about what ILPs do for the youth on their caseloads and how they spend their days. But you might not hear about what ILPs are doing to transform the lives of foster students and former foster youth at our colleges and universities and I wanted to make sure you were aware of that, as well.

Thank you for your time and attention,
Emily Plec

www.wou.edu/foster

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