



**Testimony in Support of Programming for
Unaccompanied Homeless Youth**
Jan Musgrove Elfers, President, EMO
November 18, 2019

Chair Keny-Guyer, Vice-Chairs Noble and Williams, and members of the committee,

My name is Jan Musgrove Elfers, and I am President of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. In addition to the work of our member congregations and denominations around the state, EMO itself serves 17,000 Oregonians every year through nine direct service programs, four of which involve providing or securing housing for our clients.

Oregon has the highest rate of child and youth homelessness in the United States. Of the **22,000** homeless K-12 students in Oregon schools, **one in six** are homeless and alone, no longer in the physical custody of their parents or legal guardians.

Last session, this committee made tremendous investments in Oregon's child welfare system. Oregon's unaccompanied homeless youth, however, make up our state's "shadow foster care population." There are **twice as many** unaccompanied homeless youth ages 16 to 18 as there are youth of the same age in foster care. In fact, if these homeless youth were added to the count of **all** kids in Child Welfare, **Oregon's foster care population would grow by 50%**.

These 3500 school-identified youth, and the many other unaccompanied youth who have dropped out of school, were pushed out of their family's home because of domestic violence or substance abuse, expelled when they came out to their parents as gay, separated from their family after the whole household had become homeless, or find themselves alone and homeless for other reasons. And because of a severe underinvestment in housing and support services, these unaccompanied homeless youth are more likely to be sleeping on the street, in vehicles or in parks than youth in nearly any other state.

This instability poses a drastic threat to youths' future success, and only 54 percent of Oregon's houseless students go on to graduate from high school, the lowest graduation rate among all major demographics tracked by the Oregon Department of Education. Additionally, lack of stable housing manifests as yet another barrier for our communities of color, as youth homelessness disproportionately impacts our students of color.

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The legislation this committee will introduce in February pushes back against these immoral and costly statistics, increasing support for a network of services and proven housing approaches using the existing Runaway and Homeless Youth program at DHS, and leveraging the Oregon Department of Education's existing homeless liaison program.

Originally drafted by Rep. Helt, this 2020 committee bill has three key components:

First, increased access to the existing array of support services, shelters and transitional living programs for unaccompanied homeless youth.

Second, establishment of state-funded, school-district-based housing stabilization accounts that would enable a district's homeless liaison to rapidly help a student's family avoid eviction, secure a new rental unit or place a homeless youth in a host home.

Third, increased access to low-cost host home programming, where unaccompanied homeless youth are matched with a volunteer host home of their choosing. The bill establishes standards to ensure youth in host homes are safe; outlines housing, education and other host home outcomes; promotes wrap-around supports; uses matching dollars to encourage school districts and local governments to collaborate with the state in providing such programming and includes accountability and reporting provisions.

EMO's host home program, Second Home, partners with school districts and community dispute resolution centers to identify students, place them in housing, and provide ongoing mediation services. Although students do not pay for housing, they enter into a legal agreement with their host family, allowing them to build a positive rental history.

In its ten-year history, Second Home has provided services to over 400 students, and students housed in the program consistently graduate from high school at a rate of 90 to 95 percent.

Founded in the Beaverton School District, Second Home now serves students in 5 school districts across 4 counties. Additionally, Second Home has MOU's in place with 3 school districts where the program is ready to house students but for a lack of program funding, and is in the process of establishing MOU's with 8 other districts.

In working with Rep. Helt, Chair Keny-Guyer, other legislative offices and our partners here today, you have before you a bill that uses existing programs to increase investments for houseless youth who are out of school, and to serve those youth who have managed to stay in school while houseless. We are all called to stand with these impressive young people.

Thank you for your support.