

Senate Committee On Human Services, Mental Health and Recovery
5/27/21

Chair Gelser, Vice-Chair Anderson, and members of the committee,

I am Sam Stephens, she/they, I reside in Washington county while my brothers have cases previously in Washington county and actively in Multnomah county. I am here as a voice for the youth of the future and my brothers who can take my mission further. I advocate with OFYC and the JCIP advisory committee as a former foster youth voice for the 5,000+ youth currently in Oregon child welfare.

I come to you directly to ask for help getting empathy in child welfare and the juvenile court. For my personal experience, ODHS was manipulated by my brothers' abusive bio parent who was facing two felony charges in Texas. This breakdown of communication between jurisdictions leads to more concerning events than necessary.

I went into juvenile court ready to defend why my brothers needed to remain in care. The Oregon state prosecutor said my involvement in the criminal case in Texas was too much "drama" for juvenile court and I sat out for the first hearing.

When I eventually took to the stand to give my testimony, I had my abuser staring me down for the first time in years. I wasn't counseled prior to taking the stand, I was unaware I could ask him to be removed until after researching. I wanted to identify him as my abuser but the prosecutor told me earlier this isn't about me, so I felt compelled to hold back. I was expecting the CASA to be present to explain certain things I was misunderstanding, and the caseworkers didn't seem to be fully present. I stated to the CPS worker that I froze up and had more to say, but she just kept saying I did great instead of listening to me. *The caseworker might have been overwhelmed, but a CASA could be helpful to observe and listen.*

I am here with my own recommendations, first and foremost CPS investigators should involve a trusted family member when removing the youth. My little brothers wouldn't have been put in the predicament of their father convincing them to flee CPS, had I been there on the day they were interviewed by child welfare and transitioned into foster care. The reaction would have

been them feeling grateful instead of torn apart from their family for the MULTIPLE months we were denied visitation due to bias.

CASA volunteers have shown an important role in other cases they should be considered similar to a big brother program. As the youth gets to know their CASA, they have additional support while their caseworkers have more shared responsibility with other clients. *CASA volunteers should work with caseworkers to give the youth personal outings for the youth and CASA volunteers to build respect with each other, understand child welfare, and see that their newfound freedom to rebuild their future path has limitless bonds.*

I also want to acknowledge that CPS workers are in a high stress environment with death threats and such, these workers deserve more respect from their employer. They are seeing the worst of maltreatment and neglect towards children. These CPS workers need support integrated into the system, their own HR, and counselors for the therapy they may unknowingly need. *How can DHS expect CPS to do their job fully without acknowledging the emotional toll of their work?*

How else can you personally help add empathy to child welfare? By raising awareness for bias in child welfare, and continuing to show support for House Bill 2505 (Removing Bias From Child Welfare) and other bills that Our Children Oregon and OFYC support.

I have more than enough to write a novel, however being respectful of time, I would like to kindly offer to talk one-on-one with anyone interested.

My name is Sam Stephens and thank you for your time.