

Healthy Families Oregon Coalition

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Testimony Oregon State Joint Ways & Means Education Sub-Committee *Department of Education, Early Learning Division, Healthy Families Budget, March 29, 2021*

SB 5513

Co-Chairs Frederick and McLain, members of the Committee.

On behalf of the Healthy Families Oregon Coalition representing Healthy Families Oregon programs across the state, we ask you to support the Early Childhood Coalition's agenda of \$127 million increase to Early Learning programs to advance racial equity, expand early childhood investments, and strengthen the childcare system. Within this broader systems investment, we want to share how critical it is to increase the biennial budget of the Healthy Families Oregon (HFO) program by \$10 million.

Healthy Families Oregon helps parents give their young children a strong foundation for a healthy life. The program increases parenting skills and reduces child abuse and neglect, increases school readiness, decreases health disparities, and reduces intergenerational poverty. We continue to serve over 2,000 families annually throughout the state, nearly half of whom are families of color.

Healthy Families Oregon staff compensation has fallen behind other early learning programs that are subject to legislatively mandated salary increases. We are grateful that early childhood professionals have been recognized as worthy of competitive, livable wages, and that the Legislature has provided funding for higher wages for direct service staff in several early childhood programs. Many Healthy Families staff have not had a wage increase in several years. The discrepancy has made it more difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff. To remain competitive employers of early childhood professionals, Healthy Families programs must raise staff wages.

The HFO program still lacks an effective data system. The last effective data system was discontinued in 2015, prior to a new database system being implemented in its place. The state is now in its second attempt to replace the old data system.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Healthy Families program has continued to provide evidence-based supports needed by vulnerable families. Because of already limited program capacity, last year, nearly 600 families were eligible and said they wanted parenting help, but never got the offer of home visits.

Healthy Families Oregon implements to fidelity the nationally accredited Healthy Families America home visiting model. Every dollar spent on home visiting programs like Healthy Families, returns an investment between \$1.75-\$5.70. That return comes in "reduced costs of

child protective services, K-12 special education and graduate retention, and criminal justice expenses.” (NCLS – Home Visiting: Improving Outcomes for Children).

Healthy Families is one of the earliest and most critical programs in the early childhood continuum of services. We work with families prenatal to age 3, during the critical period of time when the vast majority of brain development occurs and when both opportunity and risk are the highest.

The families with whom we partner have characteristics that render opportunities and positive outcomes further from reach.

- 85 percent of parents served lack a nurturing parent and have a history of maltreatment and emotional abuse/neglect that includes corporal punishment;
- 73 percent of enrolled parents have/had substance abuse, mental illness or a criminal history (43% substance abuse, 50% mental illness, 33% criminal history);
- Almost 40 percent have five or more factors known to increase risk for child abuse;
- 65 percent are single mothers; and
- Nearly 50 percent are unemployed.

Although the young families with whom we partner face daunting odds, Healthy Families Oregon is about courage and hope. We have the honor of working with families who, in the earliest days of a child’s life, volunteer to receive help with the incredible responsibility that comes with raising a child. Families who want help to ensure that their child has the emotional security that comes from consistent, nurturing parenting. Families who want help to give their child a better childhood than they had. Families who want help to give their child the best chance at reaching their full potential.

Parents who are courageous enough to invite Healthy Families Oregon into their lives and who are lucky enough to get an open spot on a caseload reap these benefits:

- Increased odds that their children will be ready for school due to optimized early learning opportunities;
- Decreased odds that their child will experience abuse and neglect;
- Increased immunizations;
- Decreased emergency room use;
- Improved health care for children and prenatal care for mothers; and
- Increased family connections to critical resources.

Oregon’s new Universally Offered Home Visiting program, modeled after Family Connects, is set

to start serving families this year. The benefits reaped by Oregon's investment in that program will be compromised if there are not sufficient resources to support the families who could benefit from additional support. With no increase in Healthy Families Oregon home visiting services, Universally Offered Home Visiting will have fewer referral options. In some communities, Healthy Families Oregon is the only program offering family support services to families with children ages 0-3.

As a society we have a responsibility to do the very best for children and to make investments now that will pay off in the long term. Oregon has invested in a continuum of services supporting families with young children, including Healthy Families Oregon. We urge you to increase funding for all programs providing direct services to families with children ages 0-3, including Healthy Families Oregon. These investments will pay off throughout families' lifetimes.

C: Joint Ways & Means Chairs Betsy Johnson, Elizabeth Steiner Hayward,
and Dan Rayfield
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