



March 30, 2021

Co-Chair Lieber, Co-Chair Nosse, and Member of the Committee,

We at Basic Rights Oregon are writing in support of critical investments for Oregon's child welfare system in SB 5529. As the leading LGBTQ advocacy organization in Oregon, we work towards equality for everyone, from LGBTQ elders to youth.

We are also proud to be a member of the Foster Homes of Healing coalition. The primary purpose of Foster Homes of Healing is to elevate the quality of Foster Care in Oregon. In 2019, the Oregon State Legislature made strategic investments to improve the foster care system and better support children and youth in foster care. Our Coalition urges the legislature to continue this support. In particular, we encourage the committee to maintain funding for the KEEP program and Treatment Foster Care Oregon. We also ask that the Committee consider making a much-needed investment to add additional child welfare caseworkers to support youth and families.

We know that, nationwide, LGBTQ children are overrepresented in the foster care system. They often have significant trauma associated with family rejection or violence due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. It's clear that Oregon must build a foster care system that is equipped to meet the needs of all foster children including LGBTQ youth. That means providing trauma-informed, evidence-based, community-delivered training and support services for foster parents to help all foster children.

Thankfully, the KEEP program provides all of the above by helping to retain our best foster parents, recruit new foster parents, and support foster families to maintain the placements of youth in their care which reduces secondary trauma and supports the child.

Over the last two years, the KEEP program has been rolled out statewide. So far, more than 1,400 families have enrolled in KEEP and there are more than 50 groups in progress statewide, including a number of culturally-specific affinity groups. One of these groups is specifically for foster/kinship parents of LGBTQIA+ youth. Everyone participating in this group is parenting an LGBTQIA+ youth so they are more comfortable sharing aspects of their child's life than they might be in a non-affinity group, allowing them to feel heard and supported as they seek to create an affirming environment for the youth they are fostering.

In the past several years, Oregon has made great strides toward improving our foster care system for youth and families. We hope that this committee will choose to maintain the evidence-based investments made in 2019 and consider additional support for the Oregon Department of Human Services by funding additional caseworkers and retaining affirming foster parents.

Oregon's foster kids need this.

Thank you for your consideration.