

Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Human Services
March 30, 2021
Supporting SB 5529

Co-chair Lieber, Co-Chair Nosse, and members of the committee, my name is Hannah Royal, and I'm from Salem, Oregon (Senate District 11). I am submitting this testimony as a Member of Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC). OFYC is a statewide, youth led advocacy group of current and former foster youth between the ages of 14 and 24. OFYC members shape every aspect of what OFYC is, how it is structured, which policies we work on, and what activities we participate in. With support and training from OFYC and Our Children Oregon, youth are empowered to actively participate in the development of policies, programs, and practices that improve the lives of thousands of young people in Oregon's foster care system. I currently serve on OFYC's advisory committee and legislative action team.

I am writing to urge you to support the child welfare core budget and additional investments in SB 5529. Director Jones Gaston presented a powerful Vision for Transformation to this committee last week - a vision that all children deserve to experience safe, stable, healthy lives and grow up in the care of a loving family and community. There is a lot of work to be done to stabilize these support systems, but with the commitment of the Child Welfare Division to work closely with current and former foster youth, Tribes, communities of color, and families, we can make progress.

Oregon Foster Youth Connection has worked closely with ODHS and the Governor's Child Foster Care Advisory Commission co-chairs on HB 2505 to create an equity committee within the Commission. The funding in SB 5529 (POP 115) is essential for that committee to be established and for the Commission to function effectively. With this funding, this committee will be able to fund a policy analyst position and make changes happen in ODHS from a data-driven lens. While I was in foster care in high school, I was actually placed back with my mother for about 6 months before being placed back into foster care. My mother suffers from a serious mental illness, which she takes medication for and is a very loving, compassionate, and brilliant mother. During my time living with her during those 6 months in between foster care placements, my mother was inconsistently taking her medication, which led to her being unable to take care of me to the best of her ability. This eventually led to the decision by DHS to place me back into foster care. I believe that had my mom been properly supported to continue taking her medication, I would have never had to go back into foster care. I believe that there was ableism bias involved in the decision to place me back into foster care.

Respite care is also an important component of the success of a foster placement, to the benefit of both the child/youth and the foster parents. The \$19.4 million investment in establishing an effective respite care program will help make this support accessible and impactful. During my time in foster care, I lived with foster parents who traveled on a mission trip while I was in high school. Without the ability to stay with another foster parent, I'm not sure what I would have had to do. Foster parents are also just like any other parents, but with stricter

state mandates on who is allowed to watch their children. Without funding for respite care, foster parents would not be able provide themselves with the proper self-care that is necessary for parents.

In addition to what is currently included in SB 5529, I urge you to fund the expanded supports for houseless youth (HB 2544) to help significantly decrease the rate of houselessness experienced by young adults, including former foster youth. It is crucial to maintain awareness of this issue, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. Former foster youth experience a disproportionate rate of houselessness once they exit care. If I had not received the amount of support through my Independent Living Program as I transitioned out of care, I am not sure I would have been able to afford the housing I did. I have friends who are former foster youth who did experience houselessness due to lack of support as they transitioned out of care. The amount of trauma and suffering that a houseless person must go through is indescribable, and if foster youth are supposed to be under the protection of the state, then they need the support of the state when they transition into adulthood.

OFYC also urges an investment in the state's Independent Living Program services as outlined in HB 2340. This was our priority in both the 2019 and 2020 sessions. Children in foster care are the state's children - it is our responsibility to help them learn the skills needed to succeed as adults. Investing in this program is an important step to help make that a reality. Oregon ILP gives youth the opportunity to have a greater chance of being more successful when they transition out of care. Through ILP, foster youth receive support from an ILP worker, or "coach," while learning a range of skills including completing high school, creating a resume, cooking and caring for themselves, getting a driver's license or state ID, renting their first apartment, budgeting for expenses, and filling out financial aid forms. ILP also gives youth the opportunity to establish supportive relationships with adults and build community with other youth who share the unique experience of transitioning out of care. When I was in ILP, I was able to receive help preparing for college, paying for a deposit and items like furniture and appliances for my first rental, budgeting for various expenses during college, and navigating relationships with roommates. My ILP workers helped me with so much when I was transitioning out of foster care and I can't imagine what I would have done had I not had their help.

It is crucial that Child Welfare services are fully and appropriately funded. The programs and services that I have highlighted above will improve the child welfare system, but need the funding to do so. I urge you to support the child welfare core budget and additional investments in SB 5529.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Hannah Royal
Oregon Foster Youth Connection