

February 15, 2021

Dear Chair Fahey, Vice-Chair Campos, Vice-Chair Mogan and Members of the Committee,

My name is Emily Wintringham and I am a 26 year old former foster youth from Portland Oregon, currently residing in Hillsboro. I have spent 9 years in a therapeutic foster home and most of my childhood in care was spent in between several respite homes. I know that housing assistance has been the most impactful tool from human services because of how it provided a safe environment for me to develop as a functioning adult despite the set-backs I faced. I believe that house Bill 2163 should be supported in order to make housing accessible to whole communities of youth who are in similar circumstances I faced transitioning from institutional living. While trying to find the best support I could for aging out of foster care, no one I personally knew had the time, the knowledge or financial resources to help me learn the life skills I needed to prepare meals safely, complete chores, and budget. People were either unable or unwilling to help me navigate adult life. In fact, in 2018 after I broke my leg and could not walk without crutches, my last guardians told me to leave within a month. I was attending university that year and could no longer attend since they did not have elevators that I could use to reach my classrooms. I also have developmental disabilities which impair my ability to remember instructions in order and multitask. I also deal with the trauma of having faced abuse in many foster homes I was in. My experience is a common one among foster youth. I am not an outlier and even more privileged than many based on my being white and having had some college experience.

My recent access to a public housing voucher, job coaching, vocational rehabilitation, and independent living personal support workers are the reasons I am alive today. Had I not received prompt intervention I could have died by suicide, been murdered, or fell in line with people who resort to self-destructive habits. That is not the case now, because I feel safe behind my closed doors. In my own space, I can cook, clean, do art projects, and work on Vocational rehab. Before being offered housing assistance, like how HB 2163 aims to do, I struggled to earn enough money to pay for my rent and daily living expenses because my mental health and physical therapy cost so much time, money and energy. The voucher program I am in is encouraging me to work with vocational rehabilitation services to make sure I end up in the right career given my special needs. Without rental assistance, the regular cost of an apartment would cause me to neglect my mental and physical health. If I neglect those needs I would become incapable of my responsibilities at work and I would be at risk of losing my job. Then I would lose an apartment and all the resources and tools that makes living more affordable. Just having my own fridge means that I don't have to buy highly processed foods, or expensive meals. I can have fresh fruits and vegetables daily without running out of money. I have not developed a drug or alcohol problem because I have the resources to focus on working through trauma, not seeking temporary fixes to my problems. Having a solid place has helped me have a consistent address for over a year, which allows me to keep my same primary care appointments, specialized appointments, and be able to come to and from work safe and clean.

I don't have the luxury of partying or spending money outside my nutritional and health needs. However, when you try to survive amongst people who do not have trauma and barriers, they look down on you and judge you for what you don't have or are unable to do. This puts strain on the relationships and often means you move place to place without knowing who is safe to room with next. I've ended up in situations where I had to choose between living with domestic violence or criminal activities taking place in a home, living with strangers or staying on the streets. Building trust with

acquaintances, toxic friends, and family takes time and emotional energy that I do not have. More conflicts often retrigger things that happened in my childhood, causing more mental breakdowns and even less reserve to attend work or school. Luckily, a teacher I knew reached out and allowed me to stay with her elderly mother. I was able to do chores for this genuinely nice woman in exchange for affordable rent for one of her bedrooms. I saved up some money to move once my case workers notified me of an opportunity to get low-cost housing. Some people are not as lucky; they do not find good people so they fall through the cracks. Being in my own space for a year has dramatically impacted me for the better. In 2020, even with a global pandemic and economic crisis I only had one crippling panic attack, versus the 14 I had in the two years between 2018-2019 when I moved a dozen times. I write about this, because I can clearly see the difference with how my life is with stable housing. I am passionate that every at risk youth has the opportunity I have, but I know there are limited slots due to budgeting. House Bill 2163 will allow more funding to protect youth from the dangerous conditions I described above. Long term housing assistance keeps youth motivated to achieve long term health and career goals. The sooner youth are invested in, the more time they will develop into successful people who just want to help our communities down the road.

Thank you very much for your willingness to listen to youth voices regarding funding a critical need such as housing assistance.

Sincerely,

Former Oregon Foster Youth Connection member, Emily Wintringham