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March 1, 2021

To: House Committee On Human Services
From: Amy Miller, Executive Director

Re: Support for HB 2340: Transition Services for current and former foster children

Dear Chair Williams, Vice-Chair Leif, Vice-Chair Ruiz, and Members of the Committee,

Youth, Rights & Justice is Oregon's only non-profit juvenile public defense firm. Every year, YRJ represents over 1200 children and parents in Oregon's juvenile court system. All of our clients come from low-income families. Most have suffered significant trauma and many have physical, mental health and/or substance abuse issues. Approximately 45% are children of color. Because of our unique position handling court-appointed juvenile cases, we often see the same systemic problems and we work to change the policies that contribute to these problems.

HB 2340 appropriates money to DHS to provide transition services to current and former foster children. This funding is critical to support young people as they transition out of foster care and into adulthood. It is imperative we invest in the futures of youth in foster care by providing them the types of support most youth take for granted because it is provided as a matter of course by their family. Children in foster care need to learn critical life skills, they need support in planning for their future, and they need to develop connections that will help guide them through their transition. Too often with little to no family support, foster youth are left on their own to know how to navigate life outside of the foster care system.

Every year in this country more than 23,000 youth exit foster care, many of them unprepared for the transition into adulthood.¹ Leaving foster care, without permanent connections and supports can have long term negative consequences. Foster youth exiting care demonstrate a substantially increased likelihood of homelessness, mental and physical health problems, incarceration, pregnancy and drug use. They also experience poor educational achievement and completion and an increased likelihood of unemployment and public assistance utilization.²

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, <https://www.aecf.org/topics/youth-in-transition/>.

² Rachel Rosenberg & Samuel Abbott, Supporting Older Youth Beyond Age 18: Examining Data and Trends in Extended Foster Care, <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/supporting-older-youth-beyond-age-18-examining-data-and-trends-in-extended-foster-care> (2019).

Young people in foster care have so much promise and potential. Yet, we repeatedly hear that they feel unsupported, that their perspectives are ignored, and that they feel unprepared to navigate the transition to adulthood.

Additional funding to support current and former foster children as they transition to adulthood is critical. **We urge your support of HB 2340.**

As the legislature considers investing in current and former foster children, we encourage you to consider funding programs that:

- **Empower young people in foster care by ensuring their voice is at the center of all decision-making.** Young people in foster care have little control over their daily lives. Transition programs should support young people in making emotional, behavioral, and values-based decisions in preparation for adulthood.
- **Are culturally responsive, taking into account the unique needs of young people in foster care.** Transition services must support development of strong cultural identity. Strong cultural identity is tied to lower rates of depression, anxiety, isolation, and other mental health challenges.³
- **Support creating and maintaining connections.** Many children transitioning out of foster care are without the strong permanent family envisioned by the child welfare system. Young people may wish to create relationships or maintain contact with relatives, friends, or other supports that were part of their lives when residing with their birth families. Additionally, youth may be greatly assisted by creating and maintaining connections with caring adults as they transition out of foster care and into independence.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Amy Miller
Executive Director

³ American Bar Association, Supporting Cultural Identity for Children in Foster Care (2019).