



January 18, 2023

House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: Supporting House Bill 2479

Dear Chair Reynolds, Vice Chairs Nguyen and Scharf, and members of the House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services:

On behalf of CARES Northwest, the children's advocacy center serving Multnomah and Washington counties, I write today in support of House Bill 2479, which would grant long-overdue, common sense liability protections for our child abuse professionals.

Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) like CARES Northwest provide expertise, stability, and professionalism during highly charged child abuse investigations. In addition to caring for the child, part of our role is to collect and document forensic evidence of any maltreatment against the child. Emotions often run high during these cases and when the parties involved are frustrated with the outcome, they commonly lash out by threatening legal action.

CACs are required by law to be part of their county's child abuse multidisciplinary team, which is tasked with the investigation and response to child abuse; despite this, we are not afforded any of the protections that all of the other mandated partners enjoy. District attorneys, law enforcement, DHS caseworkers, school staff and even voluntary members of the multidisciplinary team like Court Appointed Special Advocates all have some form of liability protection for their roles in the child abuse investigation and response. We have none.

Most CACs in Oregon are smaller, standalone nonprofits that cannot withstand the devastating financial impact of defending against frivolous lawsuits. One of our sister CACs was forced to close for a period of time due to a meritless suit brought by an aggrieved defendant. Although CARES Northwest is a larger organization, we feel the risk just as much; we often care for children at the heart of the most complex and volatile child abuse cases and have been threatened with multiple lawsuits during our 36-year history, simply for doing our jobs. Moreover, lack of protections also impacts our ability to recruit necessary staff; prospective medical providers have expressed reluctance to enter the child abuse field out of fear of being sued.

Recognizing the vulnerable position into which CACs have been placed, 19 other states have already enacted limited liability protections. Now we are asking Oregon to do the same. These

protections are reasonable and measured and serve only to protect CACs that are following the best practices established by national experts. Child abuse professionals, like medical providers and forensic interviewers, who are acting within the scope of their disciplines should be able to do their jobs without fear of baseless retaliation, and their nonprofit CACs should not have to bear the financial burden of defending themselves when their government-based partners are already shielded.

Help us do the important job of caring for vulnerable children by passing House Bill 2479.

Thank you for your kind consideration. Please feel free to reach out to me directly with any additional questions at (503) 276-9000.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'JGRob', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jenny Gilmore-Robinson, JD
Executive Director, CARES Northwest