



B'NAI B'RITH CAMP

Building Friendships For Life

January 24, 2023

Dear Chair Dembrow and members of the Senate Education Committee,

I'm writing in support of Senate Bill 531. As the CEO of B'nai B'rith Camp (BB Camp) and the volunteer Chair of the Alliance of Oregon Camps, I know firsthand how the Oregon Community Summer Grant funding shaped Oregon's camps' ability to serve underserved children this past summer. The support of funding for summer camps is critical to Oregon's success, and we deeply appreciate the past funding and the consideration of future funding through SB 531.

When I began my career leading BB Camp 25 years ago, I sought to develop an agency with inclusion at its core. Utilizing this philosophy, we established a foundation in which all are welcome at BB Camp. This value is now woven into the very fabric of Camp and exemplifies our core beliefs that **every** child can participate; **every** child can make a friend; **every** child can succeed; AND **every** child belongs. Today, BB Camp is recognized locally and nationally as a model of excellence in inclusive best practices and has earned us the distinction as one of the country's first Accredited Inclusive Recreation Programs. Inclusion is not only what we believe; it is who we are.

This past summer, BB Camp provided impactful and inclusive camp programs to 1,200 youth, teens, and young adults through our overnight camp in Lincoln County and six day camps throughout the State. Funding from Oregon Community Summer Grant allowed us to continue our inclusive journey. I'm particularly proud of BB Camp's inclusion of those children underserved and from diverse backgrounds, including campers with disabilities or needing accommodations; LGBTQIA campers; children from rural locations, - from families in financial need, - those who are hungry and food-insecure, and campers who continue to reel from the pandemic and wildfires. BB Camp welcomes all.

Along with our camping and Food Programs (BB Camp prepared and delivered 342,000 meals to Echo Mountain Complex wildfire survivors and Lincoln County food-insecure children from June 2020-September 2022), I'm proud to share this past summer, with help from local and State funding, we added our newest camp program, a free one-week trauma-informed Day Camp for children recovering from the wildfire disaster. The program was incredibly impactful, helping vulnerable children to unpack trauma and their emotions surrounding loss from the Echo Mountain Complex wildfire while preparing for the school year.

Caring for the well-being and mental health of our communities' children post-COVID isolation AND a lost summer of camp due to the pandemic was, to say the least, challenging. But, there were many rewards.

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With the family's permission, I want to share Sky's story.

When Sky arrived at Camp, she was like a wilted flower, totally crumbled and hunched over. She could hardly walk and complained that her legs really hurt. I was very concerned about her, and I asked our camp doctor to examine her to see if she was OK. Sky shared that for the past many months during the intense Covid isolation period, her family was in dire financial need, living in a rural area without community, and in crisis, as her father had been arrested and incarcerated for beating her mother every single day.

Sky hid in a closet during this horrific time, hunched over for more than 15 months. Sky did her schoolwork in the closet. Sky ate her meals in the closet, and often Sky slept overnight in the closet. Her poor little legs had atrophied. Our doctor recommended that, even though it hurt, it was imperative that she move her legs and walk.

So every day, I would walk with her throughout camp. Even though it was hard, I would encourage her to walk up and down the hills with her cabin mates. Every day, she walked. Every day, it hurt. BUT, at the end of the 4 weeks at BB Camp, Sky bloomed. She visibly stood straighter. She was smiling and laughing with friends; although not perfect, she was walking and moving much quicker- and definitely stronger.

At the end of summer, we received the most beautiful letter from her mother, which I would like to share with you:

There are not enough words to express my thanks to you all. Thank you for giving me back a child with a sparkle back in their eye, a child who is actively planning a future, a child with an eye for goals and empathy for others.

It's been a very rough year for Sky. She watched dad hit mom, get arrested, and never seen again. Sky is smack in the middle of an unpleasant puberty experience added to gender dysphoria. And of course, the lockdown and absence of any social life.

Sky loved BB Camp this year and hearing all the stories on the way home was wonderful. Sky wants to join in. Sky wants to go places. Sky wants to work up to be a BB Camp counselor and then on to Camp management. I am in awe in the change from miserable child to happy, engaging, and goal setting child. And a Sky excited about taking electives, participating in sports, and reading.... I'm just speechless.

Thank you isn't enough but thank you. Thank you so much.

With scholarships funded through the Oregon Community Summer Grant funding, BB Camp provided Sky an incredibly meaningful summer full of growth and change- when she needed it most. If it

wasn't for this funding, we would have been *unable* to offer this critical summer experience to Sky and so many children.

Grounded in our rich history of service to our community, advanced by the ideals of our organization, and enlivened by the passionate heart of our BB Camp community, inclusion is not something we incorporate into our every day—it is our everyday.

I encourage you to continue to support Oregon's children through Senate Bill 531. Sustainable funding allows Oregon's camps to expand summer learning opportunities and deliver meaningful summer experiences for our communities' children. On behalf of Oregon's camps, thank you for your generous support.

Warmly,



Michelle Koplan
Chief Executive Officer, B'nai B'rith Camp
Chair, Alliance of Oregon Camps



The Alliance of Oregon Camps