

Good afternoon, Senator Gelser and members of the committee,

My name is Seema and I am the Founder of Oregon's Project Never Again. An organization that was created with a sole mission to help prevent the use of garbage bags for children in Oregon's foster care. After hearing our youth advocates today, I hope you got a little glimpse of what the use of trash bags can do to children in foster care. It may appear to be a minute issue to the adults who hand them these bags, but for a child- this experience can literally chart the course of their lives. Self-worth and dignity rests at the heart of this advocacy so thank you so much for making time for our testimonies today.

When we began this journey five years ago, I clearly understood that in order to bring about some form of systemic change, we as a community would need to lead by example and walk alongside ODHS to help support children in foster care. It was apparent that the agency was not equipped to procure bags, distribute these to children as needed or to even create a culture within the agency that recognizes that trash bags are simply NOT OK!

In 2018, when we first approached ODHS leaders to discuss the concern at hand, they admitted that the use of trash bags was still prevalent within the agency and that they were willing to work with the community to resolve this concern. Needless to say that after five years and countless failed meetings, lack of communication and cooperation from Child Welfare, 2 ODHS directors and now 3 Child Welfare Directors, they still have not found a resolution to the concern at hand.

To my astonishment, I seem to have literally heard every excuse from Child Welfare employees and this even includes the leadership team:

- We don't use trash bags
- It is not our fault that their parents don't provide luggage during removals
- We don't have enough storage space in our buildings
- Trash bags hold a lot more items than duffel bags

Despite the denial and pushback from ODHS, our organization has continued to support children because we know that the use of trash bags in foster care has not stopped. In fact, if Case Workers have brand new bags sitting in their offices right now, it is because our community has now gifted approximately 12,000 bags to help intercept the use of trash bags.

I would like to emphasize that we have always respected and supported child welfare caseworkers who actually do interact with children in foster care. Over the years, many have donated, volunteered, and expressed their frustration regarding not having ample bags for children in care. Some have even contacted us directly to obtain bags so that the children they serve don't use trash bags.

Only a few months ago, and in light of a pending Bill did Child Welfare update their internal operations procedure directing case workers to use bags other than trash bags. In addition to this, the now former Child Welfare Director Gaston sent an email to Project Never Again regarding Child Welfare's commitment to fiscally support the purchase and distribution of bags to offices across the state. Unfortunately, her office failed to respond when asked how this process will be implemented within the agency.

Our intent is not to be difficult. Even with a non-profits support and thousands of donated bags Child Welfare leadership has struggled to find a process that would ensure a seamless flow of bags to each and every office and child who needs a bag through foster care so I believe our questions are valid.

This is not an agenda that they can put on paper and choose to ignore!

Please support SB548 to Mandate a No Trash Bag Policy for our children in foster care. This will help implement a process in place where Child Welfare will not depend on the public's generosity to ensure that children receive suitable luggage carriers and if I am being hopeful, a mandate will strategically develop a culture of change.

My hope is that as you read through the overwhelming written testimony submissions by former foster youth, foster parents, caseworkers and community advocates, you will see our earnest request for change.

I come before you today not only as the Founder of an organization, but as a former foster child myself who has never forgotten the pain of feeling discarded. This Bill carries the anguish of thousands of kids who have experienced the use of trash bags and hope for all who will transition through the system someday.

Please give our children the dignity they deserve!

Dignity should NEVER be an option for anyone so please give our children the dignity they deserve!