

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Labor and Business

From: John Blake

Date: March 8, 2023

RE: **Support of SB 692**

Dear Chair Taylor, Vice Chair Bonham and members of the committee,

My name is John Blake, and ***I am testifying in support of bill # SB692***. I am a social service assistant of six years with ODHS. I live in Portland, Oregon and have worked for child welfare in Clackamas County and currently in Gresham since October of 2022. I began my career at ODHS in District 15 in 2017 first as a temp and later hired as a full time Social Services Assistant. My job today entails assisting and the provision of services to children and families. I coordinate and supervise visits, provide transportation and provide in-home instruction on childcare and home making skills. I work with case workers to help support their case plan. I also communicate with resource parents, community partners and school personnel. We are required to be able to deescalate situations with bio parents and children alike. We also are required to attend court as needed but the goal is always to return the children to their parents.

I have been the recipient of several racially motivated investigations that were all unfounded. These investigations caused tremendous trauma which led to my leaving District 15 as a result of the harassment, false accusations and mistreatment. Due to this workplace trauma, it was necessary for me to take short term disability for nearly five months while I sought intensive professional help. I was clinically diagnosed with depression, anxiety and PTSD as a result of this trauma. I had to undergo weekly therapy sessions, monthly psychological sessions and take daily medications in order to maintain my mental health.

During my first investigation I was accused of having multiple sexual relationships with coworkers including a manager and possessing a firearm at work. I was not given an opportunity to talk with a union representative and was only contacted the day prior to the fact-finding meeting in Salem. Neither my union representative nor I knew the accusations prior to the meeting. Before I went into the meeting the HR representative pulled me aside and asked if I had a firearm on me, which caused me to turn around and place my hands on the wall as if I were being frisked by the police. After that we walked back into the room with my union representative. During the questioning, I was made aware that there were no accusers or complaints made against me. As far as the firearm accusation, nobody reported seeing a firearm in my possession but because I put my hand on my hip, they assumed I had a gun on me. After eight weeks with no communication and being duty stationed, I was asked to return to work 36 hours later. I informed HR that I would like to write a grievance against everyone involved in this investigation and it was disregarded. When I contacted HR again, I was told that too much time had lapsed, and I never heard from the HR representative again. There was no

processing period, and I didn't get a chance to check in with my accuser before returning to work which caused anger towards my district.

An example of one of the instances of workplace racial harassment was during an employee support group. I am a member of the B.E.S.T an ERG culturally based group through ODHS that I have been a part of since I began employment with DHS in 2017. I was asked to be on a panel for our statewide Allies meeting. Due to covid this meeting was held virtually. We were told because it was virtual, we could wear causal clothing. I checked in with security and provided my credentials. I was directed downstairs where the group was gathered for the event. After a few hours at the meeting, I received a phone call and was allowed to exit the room to take the phone call. As I was speaking to a caseworker I was approached by a white female, who stated that I was not allowed to be in the area I was in. I explained that I was a ODHS employee and what the purpose of my being there was, and I was asked to leave the building. I hung up the phone and was very angry. I again showed this individual my credentials and explained that I was a part of the group and presenting on the B.E.S.T panel. Things got loud which caused a disturbance and caused B.E.S.T management to run out into the hallway to see what was going on. When they saw how upset and angry I was becoming I was asked to go back into the other room so management could handle the situation. Fifteen minutes later I was up to make my presentation but due to the prior events I was to upset to go on with the presentation. There were HR representatives on the call and building representatives approached me to write a statement after receiving notification of what had just transpired in their building. I was told that HR was opening an investigation on the female individual and that was the last communication I received regarding this investigation.

The third racial incident that I encountered was during Covid when essential workers returned to the building. One day I had a Black Lives Matter shirt and mask, which was black in color with white lettering. I also was wearing an all-black Boston hat. I have a very dark skin complexion. As I entered a cubicle of a co worker who I had a good relationship with, a second white individual in a nearby cubicle asked who are you? I can't see your face. She asked if I was another person who worked in the building, while laughing. This situation happened a week after the murder of George Floyd. I approached my manager regarding this situation, as I was extremely hurt and upset but knew I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. My manager stated she would speak with the individual. Within a week, the same manager informed me that she spoke with this individual who I felt had made an inappropriate racial comment to me. I was told that she was very sorry and that it was a joke and that she would like to sit down with me face to face to apologize. After hearing what I heard and being upset about the situation I declined the invitation to meet with her and we have not spoken since.

The fourth false accusation was made that during a visit I did not keep the children safe and provide adequate supervision because I walked over to my car to receive a few items that a coworker dropped off from Costco while passing by on the way to Salem. The children were all within sight and sound supervision as I spent only a few minutes by my car. I also provided

photo evidence that I was nearby the children during the entire five-hour visit. While I was investigated in June of 2022, I was told thank you and received no more communication regarding investigation however it remains open until this day. My supervisor provided phone numbers for union representatives in District 15, none of which returned my calls for support which led me attend this investigation without union support.

The fifth accusation which I believe to be racially motivated was from a foster parent. After providing a transport for a child to the DHS office it was reported that I had smelled of Marijuana when picking up the child from his placement. The foster parent did not express any concern to me while I was there and continued to place the child in my car for transport. At the end of the visit, I went to place the child back in my car to transport back and was pulled aside by my manager with the complaint. I walked to the car with my supervisor and when I opened the car, she said she smelled marijuana, and I was asked to go sit at my desk while she transported the child back in said van. When my supervisor returned from the transport, I had a meeting with management who informed me that I would be duty stationed during the investigation. I offered for management to search my person and belonging to prove that I did not have any marijuana. I also had numerous statements from fellow coworkers who were near me during this time, stating that I did not smell of marijuana. During this investigation I was unable to obtain assistance from a union representative from District 15 which forced me to contact someone from the Union in district 2. The investigation was complete and found to be unfounded and I was released to return to work. I refused to return at this point and contacted HR because I felt I was being targeted and racially profiled. This caused my going on short term disability and led to a meeting with the head of HR and the President of DHS. After they heard my story and believed that I was being targeted I was transferred out of District 15. At this point I was also told I would receive all my sick and vacation paid days back that I was forced to use during this difficult period.

My job is rewarding when I can be fully engaged and see the smiles on the faces of the children and clients when they are finally reunited. I believe this bill #SB692 will impact or improve how everyone should be treated equally regardless of race, gender or religion and those who are in the wrong need to be held accountable for their actions. Management also needs to be held accountable for the mistakes made during investigations as well. I believe this bill can change the culture within ODHS and stop the mental health crisis that goes on within the agency. I don't feel that a person needs to put on a mask or be scared to come to work and perform and give the clients the best that they can. I wouldn't want another worker in this agency to ever have to go through what I had to go through. These investigations damaged my marriage, my mental health, my joy and my passion and for everything to come back as unfounded is very hurtful. Yet, I show up every day giving my life to people and not receiving the same care from my employer, and this is not okay.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

John Blake (Social Services Assistant- Gresham)

