

Co-chairs Steiner and Sanchez, Vice-chairs Girod, Gomberg, Smith and members of the committee:

My name is Jaecie Lopez, I am speaking on behalf of Wiggles and Giggles Daycare LLC in Ontario, Malheur County, as the owner and director. Prior to opening my daycare, I was a small business owner with three children of my own. Owning and operating my small business required a significant amount of travel. I was met with several obstacles securing quality and consistent daycare for my three children. Most daycares didn't have any openings or couldn't provide slots for all three of my children. None of the daycares I inquired about were able to provide the hours, nor the flexibility required for my business. Had it not been for family and friends, I would not have been able to operate my business successfully. Shifting my children from home to home, location to location, did not provide stability, nor security for them. I knew I could do better for them, and for others in our community.

It was at this time I began the process of renovating my manufacturing building, obtaining licensing, securing staffing, and opening my own daycare center. I was met with several obstacles through the process as the pandemic hit. This delayed inspections, licensing, and the ability to open. Although the remodel was complete in September 2020, I had to initially open as an in-home daycare. We were finally able to move into our facility in June of 2021.

Our facility serves 45 children. We cater to infants through school-aged children. Immediately our available slots were filled, and we currently have a waiting list for all age groups. The need for daycare slots in Malheur County is significant. According to a 2019 Children's First for Oregon study, there are only 13 childcare slots per 100 children ages 0 – 5 in Malheur County. To compound the complexity of this issue are several factors: 2/3 of these children have at least one parent who works, 71 percent of the children in Malheur County ages 0 – 17 qualify for free and reduced lunch, and the price of the average daycare takes about 28 percent of a parent's paycheck.

It is my mission to continue, and to grow, to provide quality childcare, at affordable prices, for the members of our community. Thus, allowing more adults the opportunity for work, to seek employment, or to further their education knowing their children are safe, cared for, and learning. Hence, the reason I am speaking before you today.

I am asking for assistance from your committee to grant 1.5 million dollars to expand the Wiggles and Giggles Daycare, LLC facility building back to its original size, which would be an additional 3500 square feet. This will create space for at least 5 additional classrooms, expanding the number of children served from 45 to 100. In addition, securing these funds will transform the two vacant lots across the alley into a playground that will accommodate the outdoor square footage required by the Oregon Office of Child Care.

At Wiggles and Giggles, LLC we have dedicated ourselves to maintaining a diverse learning center which supports equitable and inclusive participation for all children and families. The variety of racial, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, the diverse family structures,

and the learning differences in our community present opportunities for learning from those who have differing life experiences. We welcome families and staff from different backgrounds into a community where everyone's voices are valued and weave together to create our societal fabric and a strong, inclusive community.

We also dedicate ourselves to providing quality childcare at affordable prices. Many of our current, and potentially future, families are below poverty level, destitute, and/or migrant. The struggle for these families to find quality daycare has been significant. Given room, we accept all applicants and support families through subsidies and financial resources as needed.

Given the Oregon ratio requirements for staff/per students and the requirements for licensed daycare workers, it is difficult to locate and retain quality staffing. However, through intensive recruitment, incentives, and quality compensation, I have acquired and retained amazing staff and substitutes. I am prepared and able to fully staff this new addition, as well.

Despite the low socioeconomic status of our community and the high costs to maintain a structure and retain quality staff, we are committed to affordable, convenient, and quality childcare for our community members. Although we would not be able to match funding for this grant, we are a sustainable business and know we provide a quality service and help provide a significantly needed resource for our community.

With the help of your funding, it is our hope to continue to expand and serve even more children in our community. Through this, we will also be helping parents in their ability to contribute even more to grow themselves, their families, and our community. Malheur County deserves more. Thirteen daycare slots for 100 children is not acceptable. I stepped down from my business to make a difference, and I hope you find it in your hearts to step up to continue what I have started. Thank you for your time and consideration.