

Senate Human Services

Testimony

2.7.24

Chair Gelser Blouin and members of the Committee, my name is Monica Davis and I'm a Senior Advisor and Policy Analyst in the Senate Minority Office. Thank you for taking the time to have an informational hearing today on this Legislative Concept to have the state do more for kids that have been abused and neglected. I want to share with you my story about how I became a dedicated advocate for children in Oregon and why we need this bill. Please note, this story contains information of a sensitive nature and the names have been changed to protect their identity.

On September 27th, 2020, in the midst of the Pandemic, Riots and Centennial Forest Fires... I resigned from my corporate position to pursue my passion of empowering a children/youth/ individual to share their story in a trauma informed setting and being given the support they need to heal and move forward in a healthy way. Within days I was invited to the community of Woodburn by Love Inc. to help distribute COVID grants to the people most in need.

Over the next three months our team helped roughly 200 people, distributing around \$190,000 in funds. I knew the need was great but was saddened that the need was even greater than I ever imagined.

It was during my time there that the people of Woodburn would share their stories, many of them heartbreaking and eye opening to real problems they were facing. Woodburn is a rural community, significantly comprised of migrant workers, refugees and immigrants.

Many of them live in poverty and utilize area food banks to feed their families.

During my time there I met Rosa*. She told me the story of her husband, Roel, and her daughter Joana. Roel had been working full time as a chef, but when COVID forced the restaurants to shut down, he was among the many who lost his job, meaning his family lost all their income.

Unemployment was not an option for them, and supporting the family became a Herculean task, which led them to come and request assistance. While I listened to Rosa, something in her heart gave way and she opened up to me, using a translator as her family spoke only Spanish. I sat and listened as Rosa poured her heart out to me, a woman she had never met before.

Rosa, tears streaming down her face, shared with me that her and Roel had just learned that Joana had recently been sexually assaulted.

The services they needed were in Salem and Portland, too far away, this seems like an impossible distance when you have nothing to your name; no money, no car and everything you earn is spent on surviving.

Speaking only Spanish was just one of many barriers this poor family faced, and this left them feeling isolated and alone, afraid to speak up and ask for the help they so desperately needed.

Afraid of losing their child

Afraid of law enforcement.

Afraid for their daughter because they didn't know how to help her....

Truly this was a rude awaking for me.... I have always had a heart for the "UNDERSERVED."

The children, elderly, individual's w/disabilities. Honestly, I looped migrant farm families, refugees, immigrants into the same group...I will admit I was so naive I learned a new word that day....

"MARGINILIZED"

This population is not only underserved, they are NOT empowered to voice their pain or abuse they encounter...

They live in a place of fear... fear of the police, fear of deportation, fear of being noticed.

Rosa continued to tell me that their daughter Joana had isolated herself to her bedroom, and how concerned she was for her daughter's mental health.

Joana was clearly struggling with anxiety and depression, and the isolation left her alone with her darkest nightmare....

Let's rewind... back to the moment of critical incident... the initial disclosure....

Can you imagine how ashamed this little girl must have felt?

How confused, embarrassed, afraid...yet she found the courage to tell her story...She found the courage to share what happened.... But because a child is a minor, there are more people to this circle than just one or two people that she must tell her story to.....

Let's walk with her as she tells her story....

But first, I want you to visualize a preteen youth 11/12-year-old little girl or boy. Do you have someone in mind??? Can you see her or his or their face?

Imagine she has the courage to tell the school counselor her story. The counselor calls Law Enforcement, and now, Joana now must tell her story to the officer. He doesn't speak Spanish. He is wearing a uniform and has a gun. She's told NEVER to talk to Officers...

Can you imagine her fear?

Think about her situation. Maybe they are here from Mexico, perhaps as immigrants, perhaps as refugees, and they don't speak English.... And now Joana must talk about her worst nightmare... describing things that she can't even articulate.

Joana reveals within her story that the incident happened within the last 12 hours. The timing is critical here because with a sexual assault, the evidence gets washed away. So, Joana shouldn't eat, drink, shower, change her clothes or go to the bathroom. because with this crime, her body is evidence...

At the hospital.... The nurse asks her to tell her story, so they know how to proceed. The Social Worker shows up...and social workers need to hear the story from the victim to validate the disclosure. Which means what for Joana???

Yes, she must tell her story again....

You're wondering – Are we done yet???? The answer sadly is no....

Law enforcement shows up and Joanna has to tell her story again... All while in her mind she remembers the perpetrator saying to her, "Don't tell or I will hurt you", "This is our little secret.".....

Let me ask you –

What is the best way to memorize something?

Say it, write it, repeatedly...over and over again...Rote memorization. Yes?

Let's rewind a bit.... Let's go back.... Back to the moment of critical incident... and the moment where Joana had the courage to tell....

Can you imagine????

Wouldn't you agree that everyone, has the right to be treated, advocated for and empowered to heal when they have had their rights violated.

No one should be denied receiving services simply because of their address or status in life. No one should be, 'shushed' into silence. Especially not our children, our hope, and our future.

“You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control your response to it.”

How do we create cultural Change???

The children are our future, but we need to provide a “safe space” as we call it, for them to tell their story, with the hope of sharing it only one time. Wouldn't you \ that it is our responsibility to provide medical care upon the moment of critical incident including forensic interviews, sexual assault nurse exams, child abuse medical exams **without the barriers of language, distance, or finances**. The state of Oregon can and should do more through providing resources to help our children by expanding services and access.

As community, together, through inclusion, and treating everyone with equality and compassion we can do more for the underserved, marginalized, high risk and those living in rural communities. Which means we need to bridge the gap by creating less barriers to access. This is how we create Cultural Change... by investing in the future...

Oregon needs to prioritize resources to respond to child abuse because our children should come first.

Let's help all the Joana's out there with all by providing services they need to heal!

That is what supporting this legislative concept will do.

Thank you!