

Submitter: Heather Dion
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Judiciary
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB3196

To the Members of the House Committee on Judiciary,

I am writing to you today regarding House Bill 3196 and to implore you to please adopt the -1 amendment that includes CASA programs to this important bill. I am also imploring you to please pass the bill out of committee so that it can take the next step to helping Oregon's most vulnerable citizens.

I am the Executive Director of CASA of Central Oregon. CASA of Central Oregon is a nonprofit organization that recruits, trains, and supports volunteers who advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the court system in Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson counties. CASA volunteers work within the courts in collaboration with key agencies, legal counsel, and community resources to ensure that every child in foster care in Central Oregon can transition into a safe and permanent home.

Children who have experienced abuse and neglect from their primary caregivers are perhaps one of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations there is. Under Oregon law, "child abuse" is "any assault of a child and any physical injury to a child which has been caused by other than accidental means," including sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, negligent treatment or maltreatment, threatened harm, and exposure to a controlled substance. Most children are placed in foster care for a combination of factors, including abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, parental substance abuse, and parental mental illness.

In Central Oregon, the CASA is often the only consistent adult presence in a child's life during their time in foster care. A child will experience several different caseworkers and will likely live in several resource homes during their time in care but will have just one CASA. The ongoing support of a trusted person can be the key to that child achieving a greater degree of resilience and recovery from trauma. This advocacy is effective; national studies show children paired with a CASA tend to receive more needed services, tend to do better in school and in key mental health markers, are less likely to re-enter the foster care system after their case closes, and report higher levels of hope and optimism than children without a CASA volunteer advocating for their best interests.

VOCA funding is critical to our ability to serve child victims of crime in Central Oregon. The loss of VOCA funding would result in a significant reduction in the number of volunteer CASAs serving children. This would have terrible implications for

the children who need an advocate the most.

CASA programs in Oregon is part of the larger system designed to protect children. Our organization works in close partnership with our local Child Advocacy Center and as a partner with our local domestic violence shelter. CASA of Central Oregon is a member of the Central Oregon MDT (multi-disciplinary team) reviewing allegations of child abuse in our region. The work that our organization's do is complementary to each other, though CASA programs are the only partner who is solely focused on the best interests of children in the foster care system. Backfill funding for VOCA grants enables all our programs to continue serving victims of crime at a high level and ensures that no child is left without the vital services that they need.

Thank you for your time and consideration. In closing, I respectfully ask you to adopt the -1 amendment that includes CASA programs and pass the bill out of committee.

Respectfully,
Heather Dion
Executive Director
CASA of Central Oregon