

Graduate Student Testimony

Honorable members of the legislature, my name is Devin Lewis, and I am a graduate student in speech-language pathology at the University of Oregon. I am here today not simply to advocate for a program, but to articulate a vision – a vision of a more connected and just Oregon, where every individual, regardless of communication differences, has the opportunity to learn, to engage, and to grow. Funding the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) overnight camp is not merely an allocation of resources; it is a strategic investment in human potential and the very fabric of our community, directly supporting the well-being of our state and offering significant economic and healthcare benefits.

Unlocking Interaction and Joy: Empowering Children Through Communication - A Public Good

During my clinical placements, I have had the privilege of working with remarkable children who utilize AAC, each possessing unique talents and aspirations. However, I have also observed the profound sense of isolation that can arise when opportunities for authentic interaction are limited. Envision a setting where AAC devices transcend their function as therapeutic tools, becoming instead instruments of connection and conduits to joy. This camp embodies that very ideal. Designed to be intensely interactive, it offers children who use AAC a supportive and engaging environment to communicate with their peers and camp staff. Imagine witnessing a child's face light up as they independently participate in a game, share a spontaneous joke with other AAC users, or express their delight in a simple camp tradition – all facilitated by their AAC system. This initiative is not simply about providing access; it is about cultivating joy, fostering self-assurance, and fulfilling the fundamental human need for connection – all of which contribute to the well-being of our state's youngest citizens.

Empowering Families: Equipping Caregivers for Success at Home - Strengthening Family Units

The positive impact of this camp extends beyond the children themselves, reaching the families, and especially the dedicated caregivers who serve as their constant communication partners. Strong families foundational for a thriving society, and this camp directly strengthens family units. I have spoken with caregivers who express feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of AAC implementation, often uncertain how to effectively support their child's device use within the home environment. This camp directly addresses this critical need by equipping parents with essential skills and practical knowledge. It provides a unique opportunity for caregivers to acquire effective strategies, not within the confines of a clinic, but in a dynamic, real-world setting alongside their children. Picture a parent gaining the confidence to troubleshoot their child's device during a camp activity, or forging connections with other caregivers who understand their journey and offer invaluable peer support. This camp would empower families to become active participants in their child's communication journey, promoting functional AAC use that extends far beyond the camp week and into the daily rhythms of home and community life, thus fostering stable and supported family environments.

Investing in Expertise: Cultivating Skilled Professionals for the Future - Economic and Workforce Development

As a graduate student at the University of Oregon, I can personally attest to the indispensable value of hands-on experience in the field of AAC. While academic study provides a vital foundation, it cannot fully replicate the nuanced and dynamic realities of working with AAC users in diverse contexts. This camp offers an unparalleled training ground for future professionals like myself. Serving as camp counselors, we will gain invaluable practical experience in implementing AAC strategies, adapting to individual communication profiles, and collaborating effectively with families and interdisciplinary teams. (It is important to note that while this testimony focuses on children, AAC is a critical communication tool across the lifespan. This camp experience will broaden my understanding of AAC applications for individuals of all ages, further enhancing my professional preparedness to serve a diverse population.) This is more than simply fulfilling clinical requirements; it is about shaping compassionate, highly skilled clinicians who are genuinely prepared to champion the communication rights of individuals with complex needs. From an economic perspective, investing in this camp is a strategic workforce development initiative. Investing in this camp is, therefore, an investment in the future of our profession and in ensuring that Oregon has a well-prepared workforce to meet the growing demand for AAC expertise, contributing to a stronger healthcare sector and economy.

A Vision of Connection, A Call to Action for Oregon - Fiscal Responsibility and Societal Benefit

This AAC overnight camp represents far more than a camp program; it is a catalyst for connection, for empowerment, and for growth – for children, for families, and for future professionals. From a public policy standpoint, it is a proactive and preventative measure. By fostering communication skills and social participation early in life, we can mitigate future costs associated with social isolation, dependence on social services, and potential healthcare needs. It is about building a community where every voice is valued, every individual is included, and every Oregonian has the opportunity to experience the profound joy of human connection. I urge you to support this legislation, not just as policymakers, but as champions of opportunity and fairness, and as responsible stewards of Oregon. Let us invest in communication, empower voices, and build a future where every individual in Oregon can truly thrive, creating a more prosperous and compassionate state for all.

Thank you for your time and consideration

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