

Sharon Rush, MSW
Chief Program Officer
Hearts With A Mission
711 Medford Center #334
Medford, Oregon, 97504
sharon@hwam.org
541-646-7385

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Atten: Senate Committee on Human Services

I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 911, which seeks to put into practice a regular, ongoing rate development process that more fully takes into account the total costs facing the ILP system. As someone deeply invested in the well-being of our state's youth, particularly those in the foster care system, I urge you to support this critical piece of legislation.

The transition from foster care to independent adulthood is an incredibly vulnerable period for youth. Studies show that roughly **20-25% of youth aging out of foster care will experience homelessness within 2-4 years**, while **50-60%** will come into contact with the criminal justice system. These staggering statistics are not simply numbers—they represent the real, life-altering challenges faced by young people who lack the support and skills to navigate adult life.

Independent Living Programs are designed to address these issues by equipping foster youth with the necessary skills to live independently. These programs provide essential training in areas such as job readiness, financial literacy, housing, and relational support. When these services are adequately funded and staffed, they help foster youth build the foundation they need for stability, success, and a brighter future.

Hearts With A Mission (HWAM) has operated an ILP in Jackson and Josephine Counties since 2017, and while we have always faced challenges due to insufficient funding, the current funding structure is the most grossly underfunded we have encountered. As a result, HWAM's ILP is operating at an increased financial deficit. We are faced with only two options to manage this strain: increasing our caseloads or underpaying our staff. Neither of these options is sustainable or in the best interest of our clients. When we are forced to increase caseloads, we risk reducing the quality of care and the individual attention that youth desperately need. And when we underpay staff, we risk losing the experienced and dedicated team members who are the backbone of these programs.

SB911 seeks to put into practice at the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) a regular, ongoing rate development process that more fully takes into account the total costs facing the ILP system. This approach is necessary to ensure that providers like HWAM can meet the needs of the youth we serve. Unfortunately, the current reimbursement rate and system are leaving many providers unable to keep pace and, as a result, some are closing their doors. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Independent Living Program services are vital for youth as they age out of the foster care system. Housing, education, and employment are three of the most critical services ILP supports. Without adequate support in these areas, youth in foster care will continue to face increased risks of homelessness, unemployment, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

SB911 is an investment in the future of foster youth, and by ensuring that agencies are properly equipped with the necessary resources and staffing, we can offer these young people the chance they deserve for a successful transition into adulthood. Providers and ODHS team members all share the same goal—to serve kids to the best of our ability. But without proper funding and resources, this goal will become increasingly difficult to achieve.

I urge you to support SB911 and help us support both the youth who need these services and the providers who are committed to serving them.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am hopeful that you will stand with me in supporting this vital step forward for youth in foster care across our state.

Sincerely,

Sharon L. Rush