



PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY & JUSTICE

**Submitted to the House Committee on Judiciary
February 18, 2025**

Testimony in Support of HB 2555

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Chair Kropf, Vice-Chair Chotzen, Vice-Chair Wallan, and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Babak Zolfaghari-Azar, and I am the Senior Policy Manager at Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ). PSJ advocates for public safety and criminal justice policies that ensure accountability, equity, and healing for people convicted of crime, crime survivors, and the families and communities of both. For over 25 years, our work has promoted community and public safety with policies that keep families together, reduce racial disparities, and invest in communities across Oregon.

PSJ is strongly supportive of HB 2555. Created in 2015 through the passage of HB 3503, the Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Program (FSAP) diverts pregnant mothers, recent parents, and primary caregivers of children away from a term of incarceration and into a rigorous community supervision program. Participants can receive vocational training, behavioral health services, and other support during their time in FSAP. The program is currently in five counties (Marion, Multnomah, Washington, Columbia, and Jackson).

As evidenced in reports issued by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, FSAP has demonstrated success in reducing recidivism and keeping families connected. PSJ engaged in a round of site visits to the participating counties, and we talked with program participants, probation officers, and others who have been engaged with the program to see if the program could work even better. What we were routinely told is that statutory eligibility requirements were incredibly strict, which prevented individuals who would benefit from the program from being enrolled into FSAP.

HB 2555 is designed to further improve this already successful program by::

- 1.) Enabling folks who receive a downward departure to probation to be eligible to receive services through FSAP;
- 2.) Providing opportunities for primary caretakers who are not the biological mother or father, but are responsible for the care of a child, to become eligible for this program;
- 3.) Ensuring that program participants are connected to appropriate services best suited for their needs;
- 4.) Eliminating the sunset clause thus making FSAP a permanent program.



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The importance of including primary caretakers in this program cannot be understated. According to recent survey data from the U.S. Department of Labor, across the United States grandparents were raising about 2.7 million children. In Oregon and Washington, more than 67,000 children younger than 18 were being raised by a grandparent. It has become increasingly common for grandparents and other relatives like aunts, uncles and cousins to be responsible for the basic needs of children.

I experienced this family structure when I was a Family Care Manager for a program that serves African American youth on probation in Multnomah County. The mother of the child was experiencing severe mental health issues and was living in a psychiatric setting, and the father was incarcerated. The primary caretaker was the uncle.

Under the previous structure of the program, had the uncle committed a crime, he would not have been eligible for FSAP, and the youth likely would have ended up in foster care. There are so many factors that contribute to relatives being responsible for the financial, educational, healthcare and emotional needs of children in society these days. We must account for that in this program in order to safely keep families together, help families get access to services, and prevent the separation of kids from their families.

As a heads up, we are working on amendment language that will clean up some of the portions of the bill.

FSAP makes our state safer and keeps our families together. We urge your support of HB 2555.