

Testimony for SB 909 Hearing Senate Committee on Human Services:

Submitted by Andrew Neal Herndon (“Andy Neal”) of Medford, Oregon.

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Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Human Services:

My name is Andrew Neal Herndon, although many know me simply as Andy Neal from my social media advocacy (@andyfilmsandhikes). I am a full time social media influencer who went viral in January 2022 for videos encouraging people to “go for a stupid hike for their stupid mental health. I live in Medford, Oregon and I appreciate the opportunity to address you today in strong support of Senate Bill 909. This bill is not just policy—it represents a lifeline for families like mine and the countless others across the state who urgently need effective, compassionate, and accessible mental health services for their children.

I received my college education in Oregon, obtaining two bachelors of science degrees, my first from Multnomah University in Portland and my second at Southern Oregon University in Ashland. I fell in love with this state’s promise of community, justice, and its unparalleled natural beauty. My spouse of nearly 18 years, Lindsey, is a lifelong Oregonian, also has a strong educational background—she earned two degrees in education, her bachelors from Western Oregon University in Monmouth and her masters from Concordia University in Portland.

We are parents of three children adopted from foster care, two of whom were victims of severe abuse and neglect before joining our family officially in 2014. They were, and I am not exaggerating, abused and neglected in every way you can possibly think of, by their biological parents, before coming into our home.

The trauma they endured left them with profound developmental, behavioral, and mental health challenges. Over the years, we’ve faced relentless crises—aggressive outbursts, episodes of self-harm, and moments so frightening that we wondered if we could safely keep our family together. Yet finding help has often proved nearly impossible. Despite Lindsey’s expertise, she had to step back from her career in 2021 to advocate full time for our children due to the severity of their needs.

Over the last 10+ years, we’ve navigated a scattered and often inflexible mental health system with rigid eligibility standards, fragmented agency cooperation that has often directed us to a different department or agencies and often long-distance travel has been mandatory at times, like the regular 276-mile one way trip to participate in our child’s residential care, which took a significant emotional and financial toll.

In desperation, I started sharing our experiences through social media to my 225,000+ followers on Instagram and 40,000+ followers on TikTok. Our story resonated with thousands of people who find their families in a similarly broken system, especially here in Oregon.

No parent should have to rely on a public platform like Instagram or TikTok just to be heard. No child should have to hope their parent is a social media influencer to get the life saving behavioral health services they so desperately need.

My pleas for help have been simple.

We need to fix our broken mental health care system for children and teens here in Oregon NOW.

We can not wait.

Much of my advocacy has been appealing to Oregon Governor Tina Kotek to declare a mental/behavioral healthcare state of emergency for children and teens much like the governor has done with the opioid crisis and the unhoused crisis. BECAUSE OREGON'S CHILDREN CAN NOT WAIT ANY LONGER!

My pleas have unfortunately been met with silence from the governor's office. Fortunately many in the Oregon state legislature have heard my calls for action and have engaged with my family and are presenting meaningful legislation to get things moving on this issue so families and children don't have to suffer like ours have.

It's heartbreaking that Oregon, a state that prides itself on equity and compassion, ranks near the bottom nationally for children's mental health services. Tragically, our story is not unique. Families from every corner of this state—urban, suburban, and rural—have reached out to me, echoing the same desperation saying things like:

"My child is on a waitlist, and we can't wait any longer."

"We make too much money to qualify for meaningful services"

"I've had to give up my job because there's no one to help."

"We were told the only way to get our children the behavioral services our child needs is if we relinquish our parental rights or open a voluntary case with ODHS"

"I am trying to save their life but no one will listen!"

These pleas come from families just trying to keep their children safe, supported, and alive. It's painful to reconcile these experiences with the values that originally drew me—and so many others—to Oregon.

So why am I here? I am here to implore the legislature to pass Senate Bill 909 IMMEDIATELY and WITHOUT DELAY.

Does this bill address every issue? No.

I could testify to this committee for hours regarding the shortfalls our family has experienced in attempting to get the mental health care services my two oldest desperately need.

For example I could speak to the lack of qualified practitioners in areas of Oregon outside of the Willamette Valley and how service providers will gaslight parents into thinking that they can meet all of their children's needs even when the majority of the counselors in our area lack the experience and training necessary to diagnose and treat our children's complex needs.

Or I could talk about how local hospitals and local offices of ODHS will use threats of "child abandonment charges" and deceptive practices to get parents to agree to a discharge of their child on a psych hold, when the parent knows their child will likely engage in the dangerous behaviors that put them in the hospital in the first place as soon as they leave they ER.

And a side note, that did happen to our oldest daughter, as soon as she was discharged from her most recent ER psych hold she ran from the hospital, away from my spouse, and was missing for several days.

Regarding that same incident I can talk about how state officials told us and insisted that we call 988 if our child was in a mental health emergency and a crisis response team would be sent out, only to find out that at the time the crisis response team in Jackson County was only operational between the hours of 8am-8pm. They kept my spouse on hold for 30 minutes until they finally told her to call 911. Our daughter was discharged around 9:30pm. Again she was missing for several days!

There is a lot I can talk about, but talk and no action gets us NOWHERE!

Senate Bill 909 offers timely and tangible solutions to several of the issues we've encountered:

1. Home & Community-Based Services
 - By expanding flexible support for children with serious emotional disturbances, this bill ensures that many families won't have to uproot their lives or endure repeated crises in order to receive help.
2. Parental Income Disregard
 - Many families fall through the cracks when they are deemed to earn "too much" to qualify for Medicaid support yet nowhere near enough to cover intensive mental health care their child needs. This provision ensures that a child's level of need, not an arbitrary income cutoff, is the determining factor for eligibility.
3. School-Based Collaboration
 - Allowing schools to bill Medicaid for eligible services, bridges a gaping hole between education and mental health. For children, school is often where issues first manifest; linking those settings with healthcare resources is pivotal.
4. Immediate Implementation
 - Oregon can't afford to wait for a "perfect" system. Families have been in crisis for too long. Even partial solutions in the immediate term are better than another year—or decade—of "kicking the can down the road."

This summer I will be hiking the 456 miles of the Oregon Section of the Pacific Crest Trail, sharing every step on social media to raise awareness of the mental health emergency for children and teens here in Oregon.

This “very long hike for Oregon’s mental health” will highlight both the breathtaking beauty of our state and the dire need for mental health services that match our collective values.

Each mile is a reminder of how far many families must metaphorically travel just to get minimal mental health care for their children.

We’ve heard the concern from the executive branch that fixing these issues is “very complicated” and that we should wait to work out all the kinks before launching. But our children—my children—cannot wait. I fear it may be too late for my children and thousands across the state who are on the verge of turning 18. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road, patching serious issues with bandaids that don’t address the root problems. Families need solutions now. Our children’s lives hang in the balance.

Senate Bill 909 represents a real opportunity for Oregon to align its policy choices with its values. Passing this legislation will give families immediate, tangible pathways to securing help, and it sends a clear message that we will no longer tolerate a system that leaves our most vulnerable children stranded.

I urge you to support and pass SB 909 without delay as this bill does “declare an emergency-effective on passage”. An emergency that families across the state have been too well aware of for far too long.

Let’s seize this moment to show that Oregon is more than a state of ideals—that we are a state of action. By taking this critical step, we move closer to ensuring every child in Oregon can access the mental health resources they deserve.

Thank you for your time, your consideration, and for standing with families like mine.

I am available to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

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