

March 6, 2025

TO: Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on General Government

FROM: Marley Chavarria, Our Children Oregon

SUBJECT: Support for HB 5002

Chair Gorsek, Chair Smith and Members of the Committee,

My name is Marley Chavarria and I am a Policy & Advocacy Intern with Our Children Oregon (OCO). Our Children Oregon is a statewide nonprofit committed to whole child wellbeing through the Children's Agenda- a comprehensive legislative agenda created and supported by our over 135 member organizations across the state.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are volunteers appointed by juvenile court judges to represent and advocate for the best interests of children in foster care. CASA volunteers develop trusting relationships with the child, creating stability, consistency, and emotional support during the challenges of being placed in foster care and throughout their journey of finding a permanent home. Children with a CASA volunteer tend to perform better academically and behaviorally in school, are more likely to access the resources they need, and receive all court-ordered services in a timely fashion. CASA programs are 501(c)(3) non profit organizations that recruit, train, support, and supervise CASA volunteers. Oregon has 19 local CASA programs, providing services in all 36 counties. Becoming a CASA involves learning about the court system, child welfare laws, effective advocacy for children in foster care, and community services. This requires local program staff expertise and oversight. As an example, one supervisor may support 30 CASAs, serving 40 or more foster children and youth.

The Oregon CASA Network, or OCN, is the statewide nonprofit organization that coordinates public and private pass-through funds to the local programs and provides training, technical assistance, and legal expertise for the programs.

The primary source of financial support provided to OCN and passed through to local programs is the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) budget. In the 2023-2025 biennium, OCN received 5.9 million dollars, and we are included in this year's DAS budget at 6.3 million. However, it was not enough to prevent programs from reducing staff, reducing benefits, or reducing community outreach. This is because of increased living costs and the costs of benefits, as well as inflation. In addition, Oregon state law mandates that every foster child be appointed a CASA. Due to limited resources, over a third of foster children do not have a CASA. With the increase to \$7 million, we can avoid stagnating or even regressing and can actually make progress toward serving all kids who have a right to a CASA by their side.

Please vote yes on HB 5514.

Thank you,

Marley Chavarria, Policy and Advocacy Intern, Our Children Oregon

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