

RE: Testimony in Support of SB 5526
Maslow Project – Jackson & Josephine County

March 12, 2025

Good afternoon, Vice-Chair Campos and Vice-Chair Valderrama, and members of the committee.

My name is Matt Northrop and I am the Program Director of Outreach & Housing for Maslow Project in Southern Oregon. We are in support of SB 5526.

Drawing from nearly 20 years of experience working with homeless youth in Oregon, I want to share a compelling perspective on Senate Bill 5526.

I come before you today with stories of real lives hanging in the balance. Let me tell you about Charlene, a remarkable young woman I've had the privilege of watching transform through our programs. Born in Zimbabwe, raised in South Africa, and landing in Southern Oregon as an unaccompanied youth, Charlene's story exemplifies both the challenges our homeless youth face and their incredible resilience when given proper support.

What makes Charlene's story particularly relevant to SB 5526 is how a coordinated, well-funded support system changed her trajectory. Charlene's mother passed away and she found herself couch surfing. Through our school-based services, Charlene connected with our case manager who helped her navigate everything from building a network of supports, opening a bank account, and applying for colleges and scholarships. Today, she's studying economics at Portland Community College. Charlene stated, "Maslow helped me understand that even though I might be going through a tough time, I'm not alone because there are always people who are willing to help. In five years, I see myself as graduated from college, having opened at least one small business and maybe having a down payment for a house,"

But for every Charlene, there are dozens of youth sleeping in tents, couch-surfing, or living in unsafe situations across Southern Oregon. In our rural communities, where over 50% of families with children under 18 live below the poverty level - far exceeding the state average of 15.9% - the need for expanded funding is critical.

The rural nature of our region presents unique challenges that SB 5526 must address. Limited public transportation and vast geographic distances mean youth often can't access the services they desperately need. Our mobile outreach unit, which travels to remote areas like Cave Junction and Merlin, recently encountered a teen living in a tent whose only request was cat toys for his companion animal - a humble request that illustrates the basic dignity we must preserve while addressing larger systemic issues.

This bill isn't just about funding - it's about recognizing that youth homelessness in rural Oregon looks different than in urban areas. Our youth are more likely to be hidden, sleeping in cars or couch-surfing, making them harder to identify and serve without robust outreach programs. They

are also more vulnerable to being disconnected from school, public services, and exploited or trafficked.

I urge you to support SB 5526, not because it's good policy on paper, but because I've spent two decades watching what happens when we invest in our homeless youth - and what happens when we don't. The cost of action isn't measured in dollars, but in potential realized.

Thank you for your consideration.

Matt Northrop
Program Director
Maslow Project