

Chair Meek and members of the committee,

My name is Vishaka Priyan, I am a student in Portland and the creator of the idea behind Senate Bill 21. I am submitting this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 21, which provides a targeted tax credit to businesses that hire foster youth and former foster youth. I have worked closely with foster youth and understand the unique barriers they face in securing stable employment. This bill is a practical, preventative measure designed to create meaningful job opportunities for a population that is too often overlooked in hiring decisions.

Foster youth face significant challenges when entering the workforce. Many lack the family connections, job experience, and resume-building opportunities that we take for granted. These barriers often mean that even highly motivated and capable foster youth struggle to find stable employment, which can increase their risk of housing insecurity, food insecurity, and long-term reliance on social services. SB 21 offers a solution by encouraging businesses to consider foster youth applicants without mandating hiring or lowering job qualifications.

There is sometimes concern that programs like this might lead to unintended consequences, such as businesses hiring foster youth for financial incentives rather than for long-term employment. However, this bill is structured carefully to ensure that it leads to real, meaningful job opportunities. The tax credit is tied to wages paid, meaning businesses must provide actual employment, not just hire for the sake of the credit. This approach has been successfully used in other hiring initiatives, and when paired with existing workforce training programs, it has the potential to create sustainable, long-term success for these young workers.

Some may also question whether tax credits are the right way to address this issue, arguing that job training and mentorship programs are a better solution. The reality is that both are needed. Oregon already has programs that help prepare foster youth for work, but many of these young people still struggle to secure their first job because employers hesitate to take a chance on someone with a nontraditional background. Training programs alone do not ensure employment—opportunities must exist for young people to apply their skills. This bill helps bridge that gap.

It is also important to recognize that this is not a corporate giveaway or a handout. Many businesses want to support foster youth but face financial constraints or hiring hesitations. This bill simply removes some of those barriers, making it easier for businesses to do what many of them already want to do—hire and invest in young workers. Furthermore, by increasing employment among foster youth, we also reduce long-term reliance on public assistance, making this a cost-effective and socially responsible investment in Oregon's future workforce.

Senate Bill 21 is a step toward equity, not special treatment. It acknowledges the reality that not all young people start from the same place and ensures that foster youth—who have already overcome significant challenges—are given a fair shot at success.

I urge this committee to support SB 21 because it is a balanced, well-structured approach that benefits foster youth, businesses, and the state as a whole. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Vishaka Priyan