

April 7, 2025

## **RE: Support for SB1197 – Respite Care for Caregivers of Youth with Complex Needs**

Dear Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice Chair Linthicum, and Committee Members,

My name is Annette Marcus, and I am testifying on behalf of **Oregon Family Support Network (OFSN)** where I work as the Workforce Development Strategist. OFSN is a statewide, family-run organization that partners with families raising children and youth with complex developmental needs, substance abuse and/or mental health challenges. We offer peer-based support, education, and advocacy to families across Oregon, and in some regions, we provide community-based respite services as part of our programming.

**Senate Bill 1197 addresses one of the most glaring and painful gaps in our current behavioral health system—the lack of access to respite care** for families who are doing the incredibly hard work of caring for children with complex needs at home. Respite is often dismissed as “just a break,” but that phrase underestimates its power. **Respite is an intervention—a lifeline that reduces caregiver stress, preserves family stability, and prevents deeper system involvement.**

At OFSN we have listened to the stories and challenges of hundreds of families who are raising children experiencing severe anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, explosive outbursts, aggression, running away, and the impacts of trauma and substance use—behaviors that can make daily life feel like a constant state of crisis and survival. These parents and caregivers love their children deeply and are often the first to see their strengths—their creativity, humor, sensitivity, or resilience. But when families are living in survival mode day after day, it becomes harder to hold onto that perspective. Providing respite not only gives caregivers a much-needed break—it helps lower the temperature in a highly stressed home, reduces the risk of hospitalization or residential placement, and can even help prevent child abuse by interrupting escalating cycles of frustration, fear, and exhaustion **Again and again, we hear the same plea: “If we could just get a break sometimes, it would make all the difference.”**

The value of respite is not just anecdotal. **Research shows that respite care for families of children with behavioral health conditions is associated with lower rates of hospitalization, improved family functioning, and reduced caregiver stress (Bruns & Walker, 2010; Whitmore, 2016).** Respite reduces the likelihood of children entering the child welfare system or needing higher levels of care, making it both humane and cost-effective.

Respite care allows parents to recharge, address the needs of other children, spend time with their spouse, or simply rest. At OFSN, we regularly hear from families that even three hours of relief can be the only moment of peace they get all week—and that it's often just enough to help them keep going.

Respite is also a prevention strategy. Too often, families tell us that they are on the edge of relinquishing custody—not because they do not love their child, but because they are overwhelmed, burned out, and cannot find any other way to keep their family functioning. In my recent interviews with families across Oregon as part of SB1557 implementation efforts, one parent shared, “We were exhausted, completely frazzled. If we'd had help earlier—a way to take a pause and regroup—it might have stabilized things. But nothing was offered until we were in total crisis. And then all they said was residential or DHS.”

Youth also benefit from respite. It's not just time away from home—it's time with caring adults, structured activities, and an opportunity to reset in a safe and supportive environment. Sometimes, they need a break from the conflict at home just as much as their caregivers do.

SB1197 rightly positions respite as part of the Medicaid-funded behavioral health continuum. We strongly support the directive for OHA to seek federal support and collaborate with Coordinated Care Organizations to build this capacity across Oregon.

Let's stop making families prove they're in crisis before we offer help. Let's make respite a tool for sustaining families.

Thank you for your leadership on this essential issue and for considering this testimony.

Sincerely,  
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Workforce Development Strategist  
Oregon Family Support Network  
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#### References:

Bruns, E. J., & Walker, J. S. (2010). The Wraparound Process: Individualized, Community-Based Care for Children and Adolescents with Intensive Needs. In Burns & Goldman (Eds.), *Systems of Care Handbook*.  
Whitmore, E. R. (2016). Impact of Respite Care on Caregivers of Children with

Behavioral and Emotional Needs. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(10), 3116–3124.