



Dear Joint Committee on Public Safety,

I am writing to you today to ask for your support in fully funding HB 5014, which will fund critical services for vulnerable children throughout Oregon. This bill, along with HB 3196, will help fund our CASA programs in Oregon to improve our services levels for vulnerable children.

I'd like to share a situation that we are currently working through for a set of siblings in our community. Two of our CASA volunteers have been strongly advocating for a set of siblings who are currently split up between resource homes. The children came into foster care about a year ago; they were originally split up because of therapeutic needs but there was little to no effort from ODHS and attorneys to get the children into sessions with a therapist to improve their relationships. There was also little to no effort from ODHS or the resource parents to arrange time to have the siblings together for visits.

When CASAs reached out to the ODHS caseworker, they were told that the caseworker didn't have time to arrange sibling visits, and it would have to be up to the resource homes to get that done. Since the children had already been in care for almost a year, neither the resource parents nor ODHS had made any effort in getting the children together.

Our CASAs took this on their own, reserved community space, and put together activities for the kids. They have done this several times for the children, which, according to the children's therapist, has drastically improved their therapeutic sessions and relationships.

Another complication for these children is that no one was working on placing the children together and the children's caseworker had been pushing back on any efforts made toward reunifying the children with each other in the same resource home. Neither resource home was willing to take in all the children to keep them together.

About a year after the children came into care, ODHS sent a referral to our family finder to locate relatives. Our family finding specialist found viable relatives in a very short time; these relatives were very interested in adopting all of the children so they would be together. It is important to note that the relatives also have extensive experience in working with children who have experienced trauma, neglect, and abuse.

There was immediate push back from ODHS on offering this family placement option. The relatives live out of state and ODHS was reluctant to support and offer the family financial assistance to come, meet the children and spend some time with them. They eventually did offer some support to the family; however, the family still had to take out a loan so they could travel here and stay for a week to get to

know the kids. It's also important to note that our CASA staff and volunteers have witnessed ODHS offer substantial financial assistance to other potential family members on other cases.

Our CASAs, including the child therapist, had viable suspicions that the ODHS caseworker and the resource parents were manipulating the children and talking to the children about case stuff that should have been kept to the adults. This caused further trauma and confusion for the children.

Our CASAs have been yelled at in meetings by an ODHS resource home certifier; our CASAs' supervisor has been refused access to wrap around meetings by the ODHS caseworker and resource parents. They have remained focused on the best interests of the kids, however, and will remain resilient in advocating for their needs.

During the most recent Citizen's Review Board Hearing, ODHS was found non-compliant in several categories, which were consistent with what our CASAs and the child therapist had concerns.

During the most recent court hearing, the judge ordered every party to read the CASAs' reports before the next hearing; the judge also forcefully ordered the adults to stop manipulating the children and to stop talking to the kids about placement concerns. The judge then set a hearing to discuss placement concerns.

It is clear to us that if these children didn't have CASAs, none of these concerns would have been considered. They would have likely been adopted to separate homes with little to no effort into keeping the kids together or keeping them connected if they were adopted to separate homes. This story isn't yet over...

I've read countless books by adults who grew up in foster care and were disconnected from their siblings. We will continue to advocate and fight so that these kids don't end up needing to write books explaining the trauma brought upon them by the child welfare system.

All children in foster care deserve advocacy at the CASA level, but we can't do this if we don't have the funding to recruit, train, and support enough CASAs to fill that need.

I urge you to fully fund HB 5014 and HB 3196 so we, and our community partners, can continue serving our most vulnerable children. I urge you to support these bills so our CASA program can continue to grow to serve more children and make sure every child has the level of advocacy they need.



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