

FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN

Portland

Friday May 9, 2025

State testimony

Ways & Means: Capital Construction Committee

Good afternoon, Co-chairs Girod and Nosse, and members of the committee. I am Audrey Forrest, here representing Friends of the Children Portland requesting \$5 million dollars to support our National Center of Excellence capital building project.

Since 2023 our team has been fundraising, and we have raised \$16 million dollars. Our project is shovel ready and this investment from the state will be the capstone gift, ensuring the creation of the National Center of Excellence and the revitalization of our founding chapter's facility.

Friends of the Children is a 1:1 mentoring organization, pairing youth in our community with a paid, professional mentor for 12 ½ years. We invite youth in our community who face multiple systemic obstacles and help amplify their voices as they write their own stories of hope and resilience. Mentors, who we call Friends, and youth work together to support school success, improve mental health and wellbeing, and enhance social and emotional development. Through intentional mentoring and the long-term commitment of our program, we see real results:

- 92% of youth go on to enroll in post-secondary education, serve our country or enter the workforce.
- 83% earn a high school diploma or GED
- 93% remain free from juvenile justice system involvement and
- 98% of youth wait until after their teens to become parents.

The relationship between Friends and youth is developed in the classrooms, out in the community and at our program facilities. With our capital project, we are making a commitment to the current youth we serve as well as the youth who will join our program in the future. By renovating our Albina neighborhood facility to make it a space they deserve, we are showing them they are worth the investment.

When our mentors and youth are together at our facilities, they can be seen cooking a meal together in the kitchen before working together on homework. Mentors are leading Adventure 100 Club for youth who can benefit from additional math support. There are always creative, and often messy, art projects happening in the art and science room. Gaming hangouts and tournaments are always popular as well as the new Pokémon Go group hang. Our Future Pathways team holds office hours for youth who need support with anything related to their future after graduation.

FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN

Portland

At the start of the project, we held listening sessions to learn about what was most important to our staff and youth. From our staff, they asked us to build a space where they could work for and in partnership with our program participants. A space that was both functional and inspiring.

When we heard from the youth currently in the program, they asked for spaces to have fun in! For a space to play both physically and creatively. For dedicated areas for younger youth to read, play games, and cook food together and a space for our adolescents to hang out, work on homework and plan for their future. They asked for a building that felt like the whole thing was accessible to them!

And when we talked to Alumni and asked them to reflect on their time in our program it was clear that this building, in this neighborhood, had a positive impact on their experience with the program. Staying in the Albina neighborhood mattered to them and we are committed to staying here for the long term. They remembered coming to the building with their mentor for Friday night teen space, playing games in the basement and shooting hoops in the gym. Many of our older youth had their first work experience at the building. Alumni reflected on the workshops and internships they got to experience. They participated in mock interviews with staff and board members. Community members would come to the building to host classes such as sewing and quilting or work with older youth to build picnic tables and bird houses – building skills, relationships and confidence together. They could count on the building being a safe, welcoming space where they would see peers in the program and just be kids. We are committed to building a space where youth want to be for generations to come.

In addition to providing positive impact to the youth in the Portland chapter, the Center of Excellence will enhance the collective impact of the Friends of the Children across the state and country becoming a state-of-the-art center for training, research and development in the field of professional mentoring.

By investing in Friends of the Children, the State has an opportunity to expand access to paid professional mentors to more of Oregon's youth, benefiting all our communities. The communities we serve strongly value the work of Friends of the Children and we believe investing in the future of the organization will be beneficial to Oregon's youth facing some of life's hardest challenges. Because of this, we urge you to fund this important request.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important request.

Sincerely,

Audrey Forrest