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Oregon is placing foster children in unlicensed short-term rental homes and paying millions to do so

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By Lauren Dake (OPB) Nov. 20, 2023 6 a.m.

State child welfare officials signed a contract with a religious nonprofit, paying it more than 100 times the amount they pay foster parents to care for vulnerable children.

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Oregon child welfare officials have spent years struggling to find appropriate places to house the state's most vulnerable children.



Now, after scandals involving their use of <u>hotel rooms</u> and <u>out-of-state private facilities</u>, state officials have landed on a new — but still trouble-ridden — approach: They are paying a religious nonprofit more than 100 times the amount they pay foster care parents to watch children in unregulated short-term rental homes.





Oregon child welfare officials have spent years struggling to find appropriate places to house the state's most vulnerable children. Illustration by Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

It's the latest iteration of a desperate child welfare system continually plagued by problems, lawsuits and criticism. The practice has gone unpublicized, but inquiries into the new arrangement by OPB and attorneys representing children in foster care have spurred the state to examine it more closely.

The nonprofit, Dynamic Life Inc., was founded by a former pastor based in Keizer, Oregon. Fueled by taxpayer dollars, the nonprofit grew at a shocking rate in the past year.

Nathan Webber, who started Dynamic Life and up until recently was the CEO, said it started with a phone call from a friend. Webber, who has served as a foster parent, said his friend asked him to help a kid placed in state care who was destroying a hotel room.

Webber explained it as an almost Biblical tale. He and his sons, Isaiah and Josiah, showed up at the hotel in Lincoln City and told the kid in foster care they loved him. While the kid kicked and screamed and punched, they kept repeating the message: We love you.

"You just stand there and let him know you love him, no matter what," Webber said. "He kicks you in the shin, you tell him you love him."

A couple of hours later, the boy, sweating and tired, finally stopped being violent, Webber said.

"From there, the state said, 'Could you do that again? Could you possibly do that again?" Webber said. "And we said, 'Yeah, we think we can do that' and out of that was created Dynamic Life."

In October 2022, Oregon child welfare officials signed a contract with Dynamic Life, noting they could be paid up to \$2,916 per *day*, for every child or teenager the state places in their care. Compare that to the amount the state's child welfare system pays a foster parent to care for a teenager — which is \$795 per *month*. If a child is determined to have high needs, a foster parent is usually paid slightly more, an additional \$240 to \$468 per *month*, still significantly less than what Dynamic Life receives

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In the last 12 months, the state of Oregon has paid the religious nonprofit more than \$7.75 million to provide support services to about 40 kids at risk of temporary lodging and to those already in temporary lodging, such as a hotel or short-term rental.

Perhaps more troublesome than the large dollar figure is the lack of oversight.

Most places where foster children are placed, such as group homes or official child-caring facilities, are state-regulated. Licensed childcaring agencies, for example, must meet a long list of requirements including always providing access to the child in custody to investigators, court-appointed special advocates or attorneys. Employees of such facilities also need to meet certain requirements and training, such as knowing how to restrain a child without hurting them, for example.

Sen. Sara Gelser Blouin, a Democrat from Corvallis who has written many of the state laws to protect children, acknowledged Oregon's struggles to find homes for foster children. But, she said, there are important reasons for regulations, including greater transparency and oversight.

"We would never say, 'We don't have enough physicians so we're going to waive requirements so we could get more," Gelser Blouin said. "People want to know their brain surgeon passed the boards and doesn't have complaints against them and has an active license. We should do the same for the vulnerable kids we are placing in care."

"Providers who can't comply with state licensing rules are not qualified to be providers," Gelser Blouin said. "The use of unlicensed and uncertified services for kids in care is a tragedy waiting to happen."

Child welfare officials said Dynamic Life is providing services that would not require them to be licensed as a child-caring agency.

Last week, Oregon child welfare officials said they were unsure whether 31 current and former Dynamic Life staff had been appropriately background checked. State officials completed an audit and said later that the staff all qualified to work with children placed in state care.

But Gelser Blouin noted state child welfare officials weren't aware of a possible issue until advocates started asking questions.

"It is only because these advocates persisted that ODHS (Oregon Department of Human Services) discovered dozens of Dynamic Life staff had access to kids without having completed the comprehensive background check process required by state and federal law and ODHS's own rules," Gelser Blouin said.

Dynamic Life's president, Ned Clements, who started in March of this year, said the nonprofit has a two-week training that is "raising the standard — and is above" what other providers across the state are doing. They include training on ethics, trauma-informed care, how to interact with case workers and family and cultural competency, among a long list of other items, such as first aid and CPR, Clements wrote in an email.

But advocates for kids placed in foster care remain worried about the latest attempt to find kids a safe place to live.

"If you have a child who is a legal ward of the state of Oregon and they are placing their own ward — who they have a duty to protect in a group home that is unlicensed and unregulated. I don't know how that can be OK?" said Jenna App, the state director of the Court Appointed Special Advocates, an organization that trains volunteers to look out for kids in foster care. "Can you imagine putting your own child in a home like that?"

What is Dynamic Life?

Webber is an entrepreneur, a philanthropist and a man of God, according to his Instagram account, <u>@ontheflynatedog</u>. He's a fan of Pat Robertson, the late religious television personality and Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News primetime host.

He's been involved with the state for more than a decade, initially working with the Office of Developmental Disabilities Services starting in 2013.

In 2022, he and the company he founded, Dynamic Life, struck a lucrative deal with the state's child welfare department. In the last year, the state of Oregon's child welfare division has paid Dynamic Life \$7,755,512.

Dynamic Life provides two staff members on duty for each home, who according to a job posting, need to be 18 years old and pass a background check to get hired. They earn about \$16.50 an hour and are expected to work 12-hour shifts. One of the application auestions asks, "Are you willing to work at least 72 consecutive hours a week?"

"Our staff are willing and trained to do this type of work but not without being compensated fairly as they often work 24 hours a day," Clements wrote in an email. "This can result in significant overtime. The premise of our plan is to place staff with the individual for longer-term so that consistency is developed, and the young person feels safe and valued."

Webber also owns at least one of the houses where the state has placed a kid. So, the state is also paying him for the rental, along with staffing the rental home.

Attorneys representing kids placed in Dynamic Life's care have raised questions about the kind of therapeutic training the nonprofit staff receive before working with the children.

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One of Dynamic Life's employees charged with helping kids with their mental health says he's "Christ's psychologist in training" on his social media page. Another staff member of Dynamic Life, Webber's son, who went with him to the hotel in Lincoln City, is currently facing numerous misdemeanor charges related to harassment and menacing of his own young children. Court documents allege that he placed his children in "fear of imminent serious physical injury."

"I think that's the thing really standing out to me in terms of raising a lot of alarm bells," said App, with Court Appointed Special Advocates. "Unlike high-needs licensed facilities, Dynamic Life seems to not have any of those underlying professional requirements. All we know is they are under contract by Child Welfare to provide services to children in a more home-like setting, but it's not a family."

Gelser Blouin, the state lawmaker, said it was surprising such a large sum of money was approved with such little scrutiny.

A spokesman with the Oregon Department of Human Services said the rate was based on a federal court settlement agreement in which Oregon pledged to do everything it could to reduce the risk of temporary lodging. The agreement includes the agency spending at least \$2,179 per child, per day to prevent and reduce the risk of temporary lodging.

When child welfare officials sent children to <u>facilities accused of widespread abuse</u> in other states, there was a belief that the children were receiving treatment from highly-skilled professionals. The highest daily rate, which included lodging, therapy and outings for facilities across state lines, was \$804 per day.

With Dynamic Life, Gelser Blouin said, "They aren't even pretending they are offering treatment services or behavioral health support. They are super nannies," the lawmaker said. "That is mind-boggling to me when you look at what families can't access to support their kids at home. That is a high rate for a super nanny."

Life in limbo

I.K. was placed in the state of Oregon's custody a few days shy of her 15th birthday. For two years, her path followed an exhausting trajectory familiar to many kids placed in foster care; she was moved from one placement to the next, with stops at institutions, hotels, hospitals and foster homes.

Now, she is living in a short-term vacation rental in rural Marion County. The house is owned by Webber.

State officials said they place kids in Airbnbs "when a home-like setting instead of a hotel room would be most beneficial to meet the trauma and safety needs of the children in temporary lodging." It's a similar rationale they used in 2019 when explaining why they had to send kids to institutions in other states. They were forced to bring all the kids back to <u>Oregon in 2020</u> after one child died and intense scrutiny revealed widespread abuse at the facilities.

I.K., who asked that OPB only use her initials, does not feel like her needs are being met.

On a gloomy weekday afternoon, at about 1:30, she woke from a nap and talked to a reporter about life in the rental home. She has her own room, which appears clean and largely nondescript, save for a multi-colored Pokémon bedspread. She doesn't go to school but travels to Corvallis for tutoring.

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said Dynamic Life staff allows her to chat with her best friend for five minutes, two times a week. She does not have access to her own phone.

"I looked up the definition of like, mental abuse and stuff and part of mental abuse is isolation," she said.

Initially, I.K.'s placement was categorized as "temporary lodging." Then her attorney, Judah Largent, got a call from the state saying they found a foster parent for her.

"That is great," Largent said. "(She) really want(s) out of temporary lodging, it's a nightmare."

But the teenager didn't move. The people surrounding her didn't change. Suddenly, one of the Dynamic Life staff became certified as a foster mom. And even though I.K. was in the same rental house, owned by Webber, and monitored by the same Dynamic Life staff, the state said she now lived in a foster home.

I.K.'s attorney, who has represented her since 2021, said the setup is concerning.

"This is not a foster home, this is not a family-like environment," Largent said. "They aren't a licensed child-caring agency subject to oversight, compliance and regulations ... So, what in the gray-zone hell are they?"

Part of Dynamic Life's contract with the state notes it is responsible for providing culturally responsive services, including how to provide compassionate care for LGBTQ children in their care. Webber's personal social media posts on Instagram depict a different philosophy.



Screenshots from Dynamic Life founder Nathan Webber's social media posts reveal his philosophy on LGBTQ-related issues. Webber founded Dynamic Life, a nonprofit program that contracts with the state to provide housing for children in foster care, and notes it is responsible for providing culturally responsive services, including how to provide compassionate care for LGBTQ children in their care. Webber says his own personal views shouldn't matter.

One post on social media notes "God is not confused about gender or pronouns." Webber adds that men are men, women are women and "trans = confused."

"Can we go back to normal?" he wrote.

Despite his contract with the state, Webber said his own personal views shouldn't matter.

"People are people and no matter what they go through, I'm going to love people and my own personal views and my own personal life doesn't matter. What matters is the kids were serving ... We're unlocking individual life, success, one kid at a time," Webber said.

I.K. is a member of the LGBTQ community. When talking to Webber about pronouns and mentioning a person identifying as nonbinary, I.K. remembers Webber telling the teen: "And I identify as an attack helicopter."

Now what?

After receiving questions about Dynamic Life from OPB and attorneys, child welfare officials at the state said formed a task force to "assess the concerns that have been brought to the agency's attention regarding Dynamic Life."

On Friday, the agency said it was "closely and regularly monitoring the safety and wellbeing of children" placed or working with Dynamic Life. The agency was "aware of concerns" with the nonprofit and is examining them.

"We are implementing a multi-system approach to finding alternative service providers for each youth currently served by Dynamic Life, as we continue our internal review of them," a spokesman for the state said.

Within the last month, Dynamic Life hired a well-known Salem lobbyist to represent them. They also have shifted Webber's role from president to founder and hired Clements to serve as the president.

Clements noted they have had "tremendous growth" over the past year, hiring nearly 100 people, and are moving swiftly to improve the efficiency, accountability and "overall operation" of the organization. According to its website, the nonprofit partners with Benton, Lincoln, Linn, Deschutes and Marion counties.

Webber said he's been surprised by all the sudden scrutiny.

"People are nailing me that I'm this guy that wants to build my own kingdom and I'm reckless with kids and I'm like 'That's not me. I love young people," Webber said in a recent interview. "I wanna see people's lives change with what we build and sustain and grow."

Webber bought the home where I.K. is living in February 2023 for \$650,000. It's a three-bedroom, two-bath home on more than an acre of land. He owns three additional homes in the Salem area.

Last spring, he noted on his Instagram account he was in the market for more homes in Oregon.

"Looking to buy two homes, one in Lincoln City, Oregon and one in Newport, Oregon. We have a bunch of kids to serve in both cities. Each home needs to be three to four bedrooms, two bathrooms," he wrote. "The need is great. Many kids and families to serve."





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