

January 11, 2022

Support for LC43 / The Child Safety & Workforce Improvement Act

There is a crisis in the child welfare sector - - residential, day treatment, foster care, substance abuse, etc. Capacity is falling, programs are closing, and the DHS's use of hoteling is increasing. These trends lead to skyrocketing costs and falling outcomes for many children because they can't access needed treatment.

Emergency legislation is immediately necessary to stop these trends. We can't wait any longer.

In a 2019 *Mental Health of America* report, Oregon ranked last out of 50 states in terms of access to behavioral health care for youth. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 10-24 and has been on the rise since 2011. Youth of color are 25.2% more likely to use alcohol in comparison to white youth. To improve safety and support more positive outcomes for children and youth, we must invest and diversify our community-based workforce.

Our staff show up every day for youth and children. They are genuinely motivated with a genuine desire to help youth. But they have high caseloads, are working in a complicated regulatory environment, and are working with youth and children with significant and complex needs. All the while, they receive poor compensation – benefits, wages and a lack of advancement opportunities.

Currently, we have a 40 to 60% annual turnover of our staff leading to disruptions in care, increased costs and negative impacts on care quality. This high turnover produces significant costs to organizations, children and families, preventing the long-term sustainability of best/evidence-based practices.

This bill makes crucial investments in our workforce. Specifically, the Child Safety & Workforce Improvement Act will:

- Provide extra resources for student loan forgiveness focusing on QMHA's or social service designated staff who commit to staying in the sector for at least four years.
- Create an apprentice program for QMHAs/Ps, with a goal of 25 apprentices every 2 years who commit to work in the field for at least four years.
- Allocate funding to support the recruitment and retention of staff of color.
- Require DHS and OYA to recalculate the rate structure, because the current "*Oregon Wage Index*" categories and the staffing ratios used do not pay for the "true and accurate" costs of service, leading to high quality staff either looking elsewhere or leaving after just a few short months. This drives up costs, prevents programs from fully staffing up, and leaves hundreds of youth without placements each year. It would be cheaper for the state to appropriately resource the system in the first place.

This legislation is key to ensuring children, youth and families have access to high-quality supports & services they can have the opportunity to grow up in strong, stable and loving families. We need to resolve the imbalances that have rocked the system over the past decade if we are to move ahead for the most at risk children in our communities.