



Children First for Oregon

Speaking Up for Kids Since 1991

To: Ways & Means Subcommittee on Human Services
From: Pamela Butler, Richard Myers, Policy Managers
Date: March 21, 2013
Re: SB 5529 DHS Self-Sufficiency and Child Welfare Programs

Children First for Oregon is a nonprofit, nonpartisan child advocacy organization committed to improving the lives of Oregon's vulnerable children and their families. The scope of today's subcommittee hearing on SB 5529 intersects significantly with the focus of Children First. Accordingly, we offer written testimony on several aspects of the subcommittee's agenda. No one policy will protect our children and strengthen our families in need, but focused improvements and a patchwork system of family supports can help improve the lives of our state's children and invest in tomorrow's Oregon.

Improve Child Welfare Staffing Levels

In 2011, the Department of Human Services received over 74,300 reports of child abuse or neglect and just over half were referred for investigation. This follows a long-term trend of increased calls on behalf of children. The child welfare system and caseworkers are struggling to keep pace with children's needs. Caseworkers' workloads far exceed national standards, and turnover among caseworkers is high. Because almost three-quarters of investigations require a response within 24 hours, staffing levels are key to ensuring the safety of Oregon's most vulnerable children.

Provide Flexible System of Care Funds

SOC provides for flexible, individualized application of services to meet the unique needs of children including special consideration for a family's cultural preferences. Most of the services purchased through System of Care cannot be purchased from other child welfare fund sources. Therefore, reduction of this funding will mean more children coming into care, longer stays in foster care, decreased ability to return children home to their parents, and decreased ability to meet the individual needs of a child. It likely will also impact federal funding for the program.

Protect Family Support and Connections Services

FSC assists parents in getting the help they need to provide a safe, stable environment for their children. Examples of services provided include: family counseling, parenting assistance, crisis intervention, drug and alcohol treatment, budgeting trainings, housing assistance, children's behavior issues, and help finding transportation and child care. FSC costs a monthly average of \$480.41 per family compared to the roughly \$2,200 per month the state spends on each child in foster care. We can have a greater impact at a lower cost by supporting families on the front end of the system, rather than after they've entered child welfare.

Save all Employment Related Daycare (ERDC) Eligible Families

ERDC provides childcare assistance to working families making less than 185% of the federal poverty level. Parents requesting ERDC are parents with job opportunities. Without it, many parents are forced to consider leaving their children alone or in unstable environments. Access to childcare also impacts the economic stability of families and the productivity of businesses throughout the state.

Protect Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

The TANF program, in concert with other DHS self-sufficiency programs, provides assistance to Oregon's most vulnerable families. These programs help parents stabilize and strengthen their families, and they reduce the risk of child welfare interventions later in the child's life. Most importantly, a financially stable family gives children the best chance at a healthy, safe, and successful life.

The most recent data in Oregon shows about 200,000 children living in poverty, or 1 out of every 5 kids in the state. We know that poverty correlates with a wide range of adverse outcomes for kids. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to have chronic health problems, to experience hunger, to die during childhood, to drop out of high school, and to be poor as adults.

In conclusion, in order to ensure that our state's children are safe and healthy, Oregon must continue to make investments in human services programs. For children in foster care, increased staffing levels, flexible system of care funds and Family Support and Connection services are key to ensuring safe and healthy children. For children in poverty, Oregon must invest in families and provide assistance through ERDC and TANF so that children are in nurturing environments while their parents work, and struggling families can meet their basic needs.

Thank you,

Pamela Butler, Policy Manager, Pamela@cffo.org

Richard Myers, Policy Manager, Richard@cffo.org