

Catholic Community Services

A Forever Home for Everyone

Testimony on House Bill 3445
By Jim Seymour, Catholic Community Services
House Human Services and Housing Committee
April 3, 2013

Chair Tomei and members of the committee, for the record, my name is Jim Seymour. I am the executive director of Catholic Community Services of the Mid-Willamette Valley Central Coast.

Catholic Community Services is a State-licensed and nationally accredited social service organization that provides several types of social service to more than 2,000 children, youth, and adults each year. We provide foster care, treatment foster care and residential treatment for more than 100 children and youth on any given day. While this total only represents approximately ten percent of the Marion, Polk, and Yamhill County foster children it is the ten percent with the most serious behavioral and emotional problems. I am here today to testify in favor of HB 3445.

In 2010, Governor Ted Kulongoski and Chief Justice of the Oregon Supreme Court Paul DeMuniz signed a memo of understanding, jointly declaring the safe and equitable reduction of the number of children in Oregon's foster care system to be among the top priorities in this state. HB 3445 is designed to help the State achieve this important goal in a manner that improves foster care outcomes and reduces costs for Oregon taxpayers.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act and Oregon Administrative Rules (OAR 413-070-0500 to 413-070-0517) require the Department of Human Services (DHS) to develop, document, and implement a permanency plan for every child placed in the department's legal custody for substitute care placement. There are six permanency designations: Reunification, Adoption, Guardianship, Permanent Placement with a fit and willing relative, Community Guardianship and APPLA which stands for Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement.

APPLA usually equates to long term foster and is seldom seen as the best permanency plan for foster children. It is frequently asserted that APPLA denies foster children real stability in a nurturing home — and yet it remains the permanency plan for fifteen percent of Oregon foster children. While in long-term foster care, many children experience multiple disrupted placements, lose contact with caring relatives, move far away from the neighborhoods and schools where people knew and cared about them, and often develop severe behavioral and emotional problems.

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HB 3445 is intended to provide these children and youth with what they need most: safe, stable, nurturing relationships.

The bill is aligned with the principle of subsidiarity, which asserts that social matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized competent authority. The common sense version of subsidiarity asserts that we shouldn't do things for individuals, families, or communities that they can and should do for themselves. When we do so, it not only breeds dependency, but it also wastes precious resources. If a youth's family is unwilling or unable to reclaim the youth from foster care and there is no one stepping forward to adopt the youth or to be the youth's guardian, then the community, rather than the State, should become the next line of defense.

The problem that HB3445 begins to address is that current public policy in Oregon encourages child welfare practitioners to move children with serious emotional and behavior problems into foster care and then when foster parents are unable to meet the children's needs to move them again into treatment foster care, then to residential treatment, and perhaps even into secure residential treatment. Then, because each tier of this continuum of care costs more to provide there is constant pressure to move the children back down the tiers until the child reaches a level that no longer meets their needs and the vicious cycle starts over again.

Every disrupted placement tends to solidify the child's sense of not being wanted or loved, sets the child back academically and socially and increases the severity of emotional and behavior problems.

House Bill 3445 begins to address this problem by allowing funds that currently can only be used to provide treatment foster care, residential treatment, and secure residential treatment to be used more flexibly in support of parents and foster parents who are fit and willing to provide a safe, stable, nurturing home for a child with serious emotional and behavior problems but need support to do so.

Credible scientific evidence supports the premise that safe, stable, nurturing relationships are the key social determinant of children's health, success at school, and future financial self-sufficiency.

Catholic Community Services has been testing this premise locally for more than a decade using funds provided by a local philanthropist. We have found that 80% of the children and youth, who were not thriving in regular foster care, as evidenced by multiple disrupted placements, are able to live responsibly in a safe, stable, nurturing home when supports like the ones identified in HB 3445 are made available. In addition, we have found that these supports can be

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provided for a fraction of the cost of moving a foster child to treatment foster care or residential treatment.

If you look at the diagram titled Marion, Polk, and Yamhill County Foster Care System you will see that 80-100 Marion, Polk, and Yamhill County children enter the foster care system each month. You will also see that between 80-100 children exit the foster care system each month. This keeps the average daily foster care population fairly stable at about 1000 children on any given day.

If you look at the bottom of the diagram you will see that about 150 children are on the APPLA designation. About half of the APPLA kids are thriving. They are the ones that have found a foster parent who is providing a safe, stable, nurturing home. Unfortunately, however, the other half of the APPLA kids are not thriving. These are the kids that HB 3445 will help us to reach.

With me today is Aubrey Boyce. Aubrey is one of the youth who has benefited from having the opportunity to live responsibly in a safe, stable, nurturing home. She serves on the Forever Home Youth Council and would like to share part of her story with you.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share with you our support of House Bill 3445. I am happy to answer any questions.

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