

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this testimony in support of House Bill 2392. My experience directing and funding a non-profit after school program for students in grades K-8 has convinced me of the need and efficacy of funding youth development programs in the rural areas of our state. Throughout our state we face ever growing challenges in ensuring that our young people develop the character and purpose they need as they grow into successful adulthood.

I grew up in Jefferson, Oregon; a small town in Marion County with a population of approximately 3000 people. Jefferson is a bedroom community, being 15 miles to the south of Salem and 10 miles to the north of Albany. Jefferson has many wonderful attributes that make it a good place to raise a family, but it also has many challenges that aren't very apparent to someone who drives through town. Jefferson lacks the business and social service institutions that are present in larger, nearby communities. It is difficult for organizations in the larger neighboring communities to justify the expense of expanding programming to the small towns of the valley such as Jefferson. This means that young people and families in our community are left with fewer resources to help them grow and develop. The economic realities of a bedroom community make it a very difficult to fund a non-profit organization in our community. The vast majority of workers in our town commute to Albany or Salem for work. Those employers invest their community development dollars in the cities in which they are located, not outlying towns. Over 60% of students in the Jefferson School District receive free or reduced lunch services due to their low economic status.

I graduated from Jefferson High School in 1998 and after completing my degree at Oregon State University, I started a non-profit organization named Jefferson Youth Connect in 2007. Our organization was built on partnerships between our public schools, local churches, volunteers and other non-profit organizations. The Marion County Children and Families Commission was one of the few outside organizations willing to invest in the youth of our town. It is very difficult for small organizations in rural areas to compete for grant funding from government or private foundations. Unlike larger organizations we do not have the resources to pay a grant writer or funding development professional. We rely on the volunteer efforts of local citizens. The County Commission members and staff possessed the local knowledge that was necessary to understand the challenges that face young people in rural towns. They were glad to respond to our local effort to solve our local problems.

Jefferson Youth Connect provided a cost effective means to deliver proven, research based programs to the young people of our town. Our programs were able to make a difference in the lives of young people before they were drawn towards delinquency, criminal activity or gang involvement. A local church provided the free use of a youth center facility for the Middle School After School program, local volunteers helped run programs and administer the organization. Individual donors and local churches contributed finances. Jefferson Youth Connect was able to provide programming to over 150 students in grades k-8 with an annual budget of \$75,000.

Even with all of this local support the funding from the Marion County Children and Families Commission was critical. As the funding from the county commission has declined, we have been forced

to close some of our programs. Since the 2010-2011 school year our funding from the county has declined from \$25,000 annually to \$7,500 this year. This winter Jefferson Youth Connect had to close our Middle School After School program. Since 2011 our private donations have increased by \$12,000 a year, but the funding gap is proving too difficult to bridge for our organization. We are currently looking for a partner agency to take over the operation of our Elementary After School Program next year. If the County Commission had been able to maintain the same funding as was available in 2010 our programs would be going strong today. For a lack of \$25,000, hundreds of students in our community will not have the opportunities that Jefferson Youth Connect was able to provide. I understand that the Children and Families Commission is ending statewide. I provide these figures and stories not to advocate for the Commission to be reinstated somehow, but to illustrate the cost effectiveness of providing funding to local programs. Local program partnerships such as this would not be possible without local people helping to make funding decisions.

I have no doubt that the challenges facing the young people of our cities are very real and very important to address. I also know, however, our rural towns face daunting challenges in reaching out to and helping our young people. It is vitally important that people with local knowledge of the different areas of our state be included in the allocation of resources by the Youth Development Council. House Bill 2392 is a necessary measure to ensure young people who live in the rural areas of our state receive the equal representation that is due to every Oregonian. An equitable funding strategy that provides a way for small organizations to receive funding is vital to help ensure that all young people have equal opportunity throughout the state.

It is certainly true that a majority of our state population, including youth population, live in urban and suburban areas. It seems to me that our democratic ideals can only hope to reach their loftiest goals when they include and lift up the least of our population. No minority, whether based on race, gender, age, or geographic location should be disallowed the opportunity to influence the decisions made by the leaders of this great state of ours. I implore this committee and the legislative body to not add to the significant challenges facing our rural towns by denying them a voice on the Youth Development Council.

Sincerely,

Joe Zehr

Former Director

Jefferson Youth Connect