

## Bill would create safety net for 'most vulnerable'

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A few inches of snow last week didn't deter a group of advocates for seniors and people with disabilities.

When hearings at the Capitol were postponed because of snow, representatives of the state's Long-term Care Ombudsman's office and other groups that assist seniors and individuals with special needs weren't swayed from their mission.

They simply ducked into the Capitol Cafe for lunch, and vowed to return Monday to testify before the House Committee on Judiciary about why it's time for lawmakers to support a new system to ensure the safety of the state's protected persons.

A "protected person" in Oregon is defined as one who has been deemed by the courts as being incapable of making decisions for themselves, and because of this designation has been appointed a legal guardian or conservator.

It typically is considered a "decision of last resort," said Mary Jaeger, the state's long-term care ombudsman.

Current law requires the guardian or conservator of a protected person to submit one written report per year to the courts to show how the protected person is doing.

But the protracted length of time between court updates means there could be more time for the protected person to become intentionally or unintentionally neglected or abused, or have their needs fall through the cracks.

House Bill 4114 would create a network of trained volunteers who, if resources permit, could submit quarterly reports to the courts by having court-sanctioned permission to follow-up on the protected person. The protected-person special advocate would have the ability to check in on their cases, inspect their dwellings and connect them with community resources as well.

Jaeger said protections for older adults and people with disabilities have lagged behind those for children by about 30 years. She's hopeful HB 4114 will close that gap.

The bill is sponsored by Rep. Joe Gallegos (D-Hillsboro), a gerontologist, along with Rep. Vic Gilliam (R-Silverton) and Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson (D-Gresham).

"One of my goals as a legislator is to make sure we are protecting the most vulnerable Oregonians," Gallegos said. "As our aging population rapidly increases, now is the time to stand up for the growing number of senior citizens across our state by passing this bill."

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