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We believe that everyone deserves to live a life free from violence.

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Testimony submitted by:
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Submitted to:
House Judiciary Committee
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE, Room 343
Salem, Oregon 97301

Chair Barker, Vice-Chair Olson, Vice-Chair Williamson, and Reps Barton, Greenlick, Krieger, Lininger, Post, and Sprenger:

Thank you for your time and consideration. I offer this testimony in support of House Bill 2700.

I'm Megan Kovacs, Education Coordinator at Raphael House of Portland, a multi-faceted domestic violence prevention/intervention agency dedicated to fighting the causes and effects of intimate partner violence in a variety of ways. We offer emergency shelter in a confidential location, safety planning and advocacy on a 24-hour in-house crisis line, and transitional housing and advocacy services to survivors of domestic violence enrolled in our Transitional Housing Program.

In addition to serving a diverse community of women and children escaping domestic violence, Raphael House also works to eliminate the causes of family and intimate partner violence through prevention education, in schools and through local and statewide policy work.

We believe everyone deserves to have their voice heard, to feel safe and supported throughout their life, and to have access to justice. Unfortunately, this is not a reality for a lot of survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

We know that a powerful way abusers control their partner is by systematically taking a survivor's voice away, and thus their access to other people, systems, safety, and ultimately, alter their belief that they even deserve to have a voice.

Many people who experience the trauma of domestic and sexual violence must access various systems in order to find safety for themselves and for their children. Survivors are facing one of the most dangerous times in their lives, at a time when they have been displaced from their homes, and often from their jobs, schools, and support networks. They need assistance obtaining protection orders, and establishing safe custody and parenting time orders for their children. The trauma they have suffered often causes problems at the workplace, and with landlords. They need help disentangling themselves from the abuser financially, and in extreme cases may need identity and name change assistance. They often need help managing the child welfare system, as 1/3 of child welfare cases are referred as a result of domestic violence. This can be a challenging, complicated, and arduous process, especially when someone is already feeling the impact of trauma, having had their voice stripped from them.

For the 85,000 Oregon women who reported having been abused by their partner in the past five years, access to legal assistance is a pressing need, a way to get their voice back and find justice. Unfortunately, this access is also not a reality for many survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

Raphael House sees survivors who have had their voice taken from them every day. There's a family in particular that comes to mind. Sylvia, the mom, had been with her abusive partner since she was a teenager. She had limited ability to communicate in English and her husband had systematically abused her and their children for more than a decade. Her kids showed obvious signs of trauma, and so did she. She didn't feel confident advocating for herself because her husband constantly threatened that no one would believe her if she filed for divorce and legal custody of their children. He spoke English fluently and was well-respected in the community they lived.

Sylvia didn't feel safe pressing criminal charges against her partner, for fear of retaliation, and there wasn't an opportunity to call the police before she left to come to shelter. She had never worked a job, so she had no financial resources. There was no legal documentation of the abuse she experienced; only the ways that trauma had impacted her and her children's lives. She wanted a clean break, to start over, but didn't think she would be taken seriously because of her limited ability to communicate in English, and because her husband had convinced her she didn't deserve to feel credible.

Sylvia was thankfully able to gain access to legal representation through legal aid, and coupled with the help of advocates at Raphael House, she obtained a protection order, was eventually granted a divorce, and fought for full legal custody of her children. She had access to justice, and understood that she deserved to have her rights be respected and honored thanks to being given a voice within the civil justice system.

Sylvia's story highlights just how critical Oregon's legal aid services are to providing necessary support and advocacy services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence to get their voice back. Without legal representation, Sylvia most likely would have been forced to stay legally married to her abusive partner and place her children in harm's way every time she was forced to relinquish custody to her abusive husband, if she was even able to make the choice to permanently leave the relationship herself.