

# Youth, Rights & Justice

ATTORNEYS AT LAW

To: House Committee on Judiciary, 2015 Oregon Legislature

From: Mark McKechnie, Executive Director, Youth, Rights & Justice

Date: February 23, 2015

Re: **Support for HB 2358**

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Chair Barker and Members of the Committee:

Youth, Rights & Justice (YRJ) was founded 40 years ago and has been dedicated to providing legal representation and advocacy to over 50,000 children, youth and parents involved in the juvenile court system, including children in foster care and youth in the juvenile justice system. YRJ has also worked extensively with the Legislature, the Oregon Law Commission, various state agencies and other organizations to improve policies and services to the children of Oregon during that time. YRJ supports HB 2358.

HB 2358 would increase resources for the juvenile court system and for the Department of Human Services to more effectively and efficiently handle cases involving children placed in foster care due to abuse or neglect. Through the use of county-based pilot projects, this legislation would help to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce the time it takes to achieve successful exits from foster care. **The top three goals for children exiting foster care are to return home, to achieve adoption or to be placed in a guardianship.**

YRJ is focusing our testimony on the importance of manageable caseloads for attorneys representing children in foster care, their mothers or their fathers. A pilot project in Washington State was established in 2001 with two counties and has grown over time to include 31 of Washington's 39 counties. In addition to attorney performance standards and support from contracted social workers and investigators, the Parent Representation Project (PRP) in Washington limits attorney workloads to **no more than 80 open cases per full-time attorney**. The firms contracted to represent children and parents in juvenile dependency matters in Oregon do not receive adequate funding to meet such a standard and often carry significantly higher caseloads as a result.

A research study led by one of the foremost researchers in the child welfare field, Dr. Mark Courtney from the Chapin Hall center at the University of Chicago, evaluated outcomes for more than 12,000 children in Washington. It found that, for children in pilot counties versus children in non-pilot counties:

- The rate of **reunification** with one or both parents was **11% higher**;
- The rate of **adoption** was **83% higher**;
- The rate at which children entered **guardianships** was **102% higher**.

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Overall, among children achieving permanency: 68% were reunified, 26% were adopted and 6% exited to guardianship. Additional evaluations of the Parent Representation Program found that, on average, **adoptions were achieved roughly one year sooner** in pilot counties, compared to non-pilot counties. For more information, please see:

<http://www.opd.wa.gov/index.php/program/parents-representation>.

HB 2358 would allow Oregon to embark upon a similar and successful path and provide better services to children and families who become involved in the child protection system. Helping families to reunify more quickly and more successfully is in everyone's interest. Moving more children out of foster care efficiently, safely and successfully is critical for their long-term success and advances numerous public interests for the state.

Youth, Rights & Justice encourages your support of HB 2358.