

March 23, 2015

The Honorable Val Hoyle, Chair and Vic Gilliam and Barbara Smith Warner, Vice-Chairs
House Committee on Rules

Re: Support for HB 3418

Chair Hoyle, Vice Chairs Gilliam and Smith Warner, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Janice Garceau. I am the Program Manager for Multnomah County Family Court Services and Chair of the Oregon Association of Family Court Services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 3418.

The passage of HB 3418 would allow counties the ability to raise an add-on surcharge to the marriage license fee which would provide a much-needed increase in funding for mediation programs. The amount that counties have been able to levy for mediation through this revenue source has not been increased in over twenty years.

Family mediation services have been woefully underfunded for years. Since 2011, Multnomah Family Court Services has experienced an increase of nearly 30% in workload and a simultaneous reduction in staff capacity due to revenue reductions, a pattern shared by mediation programs around the state. This is at a time when the number of people representing themselves has steadily increased, making alternative dispute resolution options even more critical a need.

The passage of this bill will allow county leaders to help bridge the ever-widening gap between the increasing demand for mediation services and the ability to fund them. If Multnomah County were to receive additional funding, we could add back some needed mediation and support services that were eliminated since in 2011 due to losses in revenue. It would help increase our capacity to assist parents with drafting parenting time plans, protect children from parental conflict, and provide services for safer negotiation venues for Domestic Violence survivors.

Critical Benefits of Mediation Services

Mediation services for families have a number of key benefits which include:

- *Cost*: Mediation keeps parents out of costly court proceedings by providing a free or low cost alternative to resolve disagreements about children. Many cases are diverted from hearings and trials that would otherwise burden the Court system.
- *Control*: Mediation keeps parents in control of critical private decisions about children.
- *Domestic Violence (DV) survivors*: Many DV victims choose mediation as a safer way to establish plans for children. Court can be intimidating and unpredictable for DV survivors and there may not always be a level playing field due to perpetrators' increased control of resources and better access to legal advocacy.
- *Protection of Children*: Research has long shown that exposure to parental conflict places children at increased risk for school and emotional problems as well as potential loss of contact with one parent. Mediation helps protect children by giving parents a safe place to have difficult conversations and make child-focused plans.

Clients who have utilized these services have shared how they make a difference for their family. One mom offered "Thank you for this wonderful service! It's our 2nd year using you to negotiate our parenting time agreement and we've already scheduled for 2015. We couldn't get this done without you!"

A dad shared "[The mediator] did an excellent job guiding us through the process; she was balanced, thoughtful in the approach, offering us suggestions that fit our children."

In summary, I respectfully request that you support HB 3418. These services are a critical component of the court system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Submitted by:

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