



CASA For Children, Multnomah, Washington, & Columbia Counties
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TO: Senate Committee on Health and Early Childhood

FROM: Lynn Travis, CASA for Children, Multnomah, Washington & Columbia County

DATE: April 7, 2015

RE: Support for SB 741

Chair Gelser and Committee Members:

I am the Program Director and Program Attorney for CASA for Children of Multnomah, Washington and Columbia Counties. I am testifying today on behalf of the Oregon CASA Network – a collaboration of the government and non-profit agencies who recruit, train, and support volunteer advocates for children under juvenile court supervision because of abuse or neglect. Network member agencies support over 1800 volunteers advocating for over 4800 children, many of whom are in foster care. CASA's primary goal is to advocate for safe, expedient permanency for children which may be adoption, guardianship or return to a parent. About 20% of the cases CASAs closed in Multnomah, Washington and Columbia counties last year ended in adoption.

I am also testifying on behalf of the Permanency Coalition which is a network of non-profit child serving agencies¹ and advocates who have been meeting since 2012 and have joined forces to improve the chances that all children live in permanent families and have stable, nurturing, lifelong relationships.

Both groups support passage of SB 741 as a necessary step to ensure that permanency decisions will be based on the individual needs of each child rather than on an assumption that, in all cases, children are best placed with relatives regardless of the child's relationships with important adults.

As a general rule, both CASA and the Permanency Coalition recognize the critical role family plays for children in foster care. The opportunity to be raised by extended family is often the very best alternative for children who have suffered the loss of their birth parents. That is why CASAs advocate for early identification and engagement of family members as well as early placement with relatives for children who can't live with their parents. However, engaging relatives in early case activities (particularly when they live far away or are not able to provide foster care) is challenging for DHS caseworkers who are focused on reunification services and visitation for parents or maintaining stable foster placements. Family members may wait in the wings until it becomes apparent that children will be adopted. In the mean time, children often develop important

¹ Permanency Coalition members are: Boys & Girls Aid, Bridge Meadows, Catholic Community Services, CASA of Multnomah, Washington and Columbia Counties, Children First for Oregon, New Avenues for Youth, Youth, Rights & Justice, and Youth Villages

attachments to non-related foster families. In those cases, decisions to remove children from what are often the only parents they have ever known in order to place with relatives they may have never met should involve careful consideration of the impact of ending that relationship as well as the benefit to being raised by kin.

Narrowly defining children's permanency needs to exclude consideration of families to whom they are attached but not related by blood is unfair to the children both CASA and the Permanency Coalition serve. SB 741 allows DHS, providers, and advocates to approach individual adoption decisions in a way that takes into account that particular child's needs rather than always preferring relatives, regardless of emotional relationship.

On behalf of CASA and the Permanency Coalition, I urge you to continue to move SB 741 towards passage.