

Youth, Rights & Justice

ATTORNEYS AT LAW

To: House Committee on Human Services and Housing, 2017 Oregon Legislative Assembly

From: Mark McKechnie, MSW, Executive Director

Date: March 7, 2017

RE: HB 2170 – Establishment of Independent Ombudsmen for Foster Youth and Foster Parents

Chair Keny-Guyer and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mark McKechnie, and I am the Executive Director of Youth, Rights & Justice. YRJ attorneys have represented children, youth and parents in the juvenile dependency system since 1975.

YRJ supported the establishment of the Foster Care Ombudsman in 2013, and YRJ supports the establishment of an independent office in HB 2170. In addition, we support the establishment of an Ombudsman for foster parents. With the addition of the foster parent ombudsman, it will be important to add rules regarding confidentiality and to limit the sharing of information between the ombudsmen for the foster parents and foster youth. It is important that confidential information be kept separate between the two except when appropriate releases of information are signed.

Foster parents are volunteers who bear the largest responsibility for the daily care of foster children and youth. They deserve to be treated far better and supported far more than they are.

While most caseworkers appear to support and appreciate the role of foster parents as critical care providers to abused and neglected children, we continue to be troubled by instances we have seen where foster parents are blamed and scapegoated by some case workers, supervisors and managers at the Department of Human Services. This is a long-standing problem, and DHS has thus far been unable to address and resolve these issues internally.

Over decades, we have seen the same case workers continue to have poor relationships with foster parents. When this occurs, good foster parents can be lost to the system, sometimes forever, and when this occurs, it is harmful to both foster parents and to children in need of caring, stable placements. When people have negative experiences with DHS, the information spreads through word-of-mouth, and this inhibits the agency's recruitment efforts.

We believe the time has come to establish a more independent office of Ombudsmen for both foster youth and foster parents.

Youth, Rights & Justice supports HB 2170 with the addition of confidentiality protections for those served by the office.