



IN FAVOR HB 2171 (Introduced)

House Judiciary, March 8, 2017

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Chair Barker, Vice-Chairs Olson and Williamson, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Kathleen Joy. I am the Executive Director of Oregon Volunteers Commission for Voluntary Action and Service. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on HB 2171.

As the current statutory home for local CASA programs in Oregon, this bill requires our organization to maintain volunteer staff of court appointed special advocates sufficient to meet the statutory requirement to appoint advocates in every juvenile dependency proceeding. Since you will be hearing a bill later today to transfer the CASA program to the Criminal Justice Commission, we recognize the intent of the sponsors to pass this responsibility on to the next, and what we hope will be the final, home for CASA programs in the state. In the meantime, our organization bears that responsibility so we offer our thoughts to the members of the committee and to the next potential home for the programs.

When we were first approached by the Governor's office in 2011 to consider assuming responsibility for CASA, I was frankly appalled to learn about the gap between the statutory requirements and the practical reality in local communities. I recognize and celebrate the passion that the judge who initiated the Oregon statutes for CASA brought to the enabling legislation. At the same time, neither members of the commission nor I have been able to reconcile the legal requirements with the appropriations reality.

Across the state, the percentages of children served varies from highs of 98-100% in some counties to lows in the 20% range in others, with a median of 44%. This disparity is not the result of sub-performance activity. It is a result of inadequate funding for this vital program. When the language you see in this bill was originally passed, it was accompanied by a symbolic \$1 appropriation. That was almost 38 years ago, and the disproportionality between requirements and resources has been consistent since that time.

The requirements in the law were described to me as "aspirational" when we assumed responsibility for the program in 2012. Were we naïve to question why the bill contained language that would be impossible to achieve without a multimillion dollar investment by the state to meet its mandate? Since our work with federal entities also has a number of unfunded mandates, we understood the answer. We just have difficulty accepting it as the status quo.

Clearly this is not a challenge that will be solved in one biennium or even two. It will be up to members of the legislature to develop a plan that will increasing state funding to local CASA programs sufficient to meet the needs of every child needing an advocate in their jurisdictions.

I urge members of this committee to move the requirements of this bill from "aspirational" to "perspirational". It will take hard work to make this happen! Please begin the difficult but rewarding work to insure that every local child is served in a manner envisioned by the founders, the legislature and governor at that time. By providing adequate funding to meet the legal mandate we should hear far fewer of the stories that you heard in the hearing this afternoon.