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Empowering adolescent girls to lead healthy and productive lives in their families and communities

January 30, 2017

Dear Senate Human Services Committee Chair Senator Gelser and Committee Members:

As the Executive Director of The Salvation Army White Shield Center (WSC) and board member of the Oregon Alliance of Children's Programs and Coalition of Advocates for Equal Access for Girls, I would like to take an opportunity to share with you the impact of the regulatory changes and implementation that have occurred over the last year for Child Care Agencies (CCA). First, however, I'd like to tell you about WSC, the girls, young women and children we serve. WSC is a residential treatment program in NW Portland serving adolescent girls, young women (ages 12-20) and their families from across the state of Oregon. Approximately one-third of the population served at the WSC are pregnant and/or parenting teens, whose children (0-3) also reside at the center. 100% of our residents have experienced adverse childhood trauma and grief; some are still in the throes of these experiences, as often it is a result of inter-generational, collective, systemic and historical nature. The trauma and grief response for girls is manifest in many ways; often, it is expressed via highly dysregulated emotions, depression, lagging social skills, relational aggression, criminal actions, self-injurious behaviors that are not life threatening, or in some cases, suicidal ideation or gestures. They are incredibly resilient, but their lives have been altered.

WSC is licensed and regulated by the Department of Human Services (DHS), and has contracts with DHS and Oregon Youth Authority for Behavior Rehabilitation Services. WSC is one of the last female gender-specific programs left in the state. We are in a unique position to incorporate both intervention and prevention strategies in the lives of these girls/young women, their children and their families. Through the use of evidenced-based practices in the context of positive, therapeutic and affirming relationships with available family, staff and mentors; they are safe, well-cared for and their futures hold promise as a result of these services.

The impact of the regulatory changes is most notable in three areas: who we serve, how we serve and the resources that allow us to serve:

Who we serve. Since the implementation of the changes, WSC has turned away 20% of referrals that would have previously been admitted to its programs because of too recent suicidal ideation or self-harming behaviors, which as noted above, is a common manifestation of trauma for girls. Our staff are trained to enhance supervision, utilize external resources and support girls through these crises. This equates to at least 15 girls/young women who would have benefitted from services.

How we serve. Since the implementation of the changes, fear has become a factor in decision making. Fear-based care does not enhance safety, it is not trauma-informed, nor does it promote healthy relationships – all necessary ingredients for serving girls well. This is most clearly exemplified by four girls whose services were abruptly terminated from WSC in recent months due to suicidal ideation. None of them meet criteria for admittance to the adolescent psychiatric services, but were not willing in the moment to make a safety plan. Our staff had to make the difficult decision to contact DHS and leave the girls at the hospital. It was too much of a liability for them to return to WSC for fear that the program would be viewed as serving youth who are outside its scope of services. This approach was a direct result of another situation in the spring by which a girl tried to take her life at WSC 20 minutes after returning from the hospital where she had been evaluated for

suicidal ideation and not admitted to care. Fortunately, staff intervened and thwarted the attempt and she survived without physical or mental repercussions. These are five girls among many who are caught between systems due to the manifestation of their trauma. Prior to the changes, WSC would have been more willing to consider re-admitting these girls with additional safe-guards in place, knowing that the continuity of relationships is paramount to their ability to work through the impact of trauma.

Resources that allow us to serve. There is a fiscal impact due to the regulatory changes. As a licensed CCA, WSC is already subject to stringent oversight, audits and program reviews; accountability is important and we strive for excellence. The time and resources used to address the impact of the regulatory changes should be devoted instead to the girls, young women and families we serve, invested in enhancing our services and allocated to the training and development of the staff. Since implementation of the changes, at minimum 10% of the WSC budget has been redirected toward the resulting fallout or has been lost due to under-utilization (who and how we serve). This is not sustainable and jeopardizes the very services so desperately needed.

Ultimately, the girls/young women and their children at WSC and youth in other CCAs are the ones who suffer. They are already marginalized and disadvantaged. To view them in terms of their liabilities instead of their strengths and potential is heartbreaking and distressing. The services that support them to transform their lives are being drastically undermined. Oregon, this is not who we are.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share these concerns. Thank you for your faithful service and for working so diligently for your constituents and the vulnerable citizens of the State of Oregon.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diane Brandsma", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Diane Brandsma, M.A.