

Good Afternoon, Chair Barker, Vice Chair Olsen, Vice Chair Williamson, And members of the committee,

My name is Laura Hallett of Portland Oregon.

I will be requesting to speak at the hearing on February 14th and wanted to submit my full thoughts prior to the committee meeting.

I am a grandmother, a former Relative Foster Care provider, an Oregon member of the National Family Advocacy Team and the newly formed Foster Care Reduction Project that advocates for change within the child abuse/neglect system to assure that due process to ALL who are involved with the system.

I am here today in support of HB 4009

This is about Foster Care. No, actually, it's about something more precious, unique, and irreplaceable than Foster Care. This is about Families.

According to the Audit release by Secretary of State Dennis Richardson, in 2016, there were 11,191 children recorded as spending at least **one day in the foster care system** for the whole year, and a daily average of 7,600.

It was also state that DHS performed poorly on the 2016 Federal Child and Family Services Review This review, which states receive approximately every six years, assesses the overall ability of the child welfare system to serve and protect vulnerable children. Historically, Oregon has not done well on these measures and has gotten worse over time. For the 2016 review, the state did not meet any of the seven outcome measures and did not meet five of the seven systemic factors. For example, the review showed inconsistent application of procedures across the state during the investigatory process and a lack of follow-up on allegations of abuse of children in foster care. In addition, the review identified confusing DHS investigatory rules, policies, and processes. It also highlighted a lack of coordination among the multiple entities responsible for responding to allegations of abuse and neglect.

During FFY 2016, there were 6,708 cases founded for abuse or neglect involving 11,191 children.

There were 11,843 unduplicated child abuse/neglect victims in FFY 2016.

Of all types of maltreatment, "neglect" was identified in 42.9% of the cases, followed by "threat of harm" in 40.7% of the cases. With a whopping 71.3% of 11,191 children being removed from their home for "neglect", I wanted to see a clear and concise definition of neglect. Surely, neglect would have to mean that there had been severe harm to these children, significantly worse, or at least as bad as the crushing pain and enduring trauma a child suffers when he or she is removed from his home and loved ones, and put in the home of strangers.

But the definition I found was cloudy at best. Oregon Revised Statute "ORS 419B.005 (1) (F)" states: [neglect is] Negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child, including but not limited to the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter or medical care that is likely to endanger the health or welfare of the child.

In my opinion, this is a cloudy definition at best. For example, I own three pair of shoes. I believe that three pairs of shoes are "adequate". In fact, in addition to keeping my feet safe, I am satisfied and even happy with three pairs of shoes. But my friend owns ten pairs of shoes, and she cannot understand how I can keep my feet safe, and feel satisfied, let alone happy with "only" three pairs.

"Who is correct?"

The definition of "neglect" needs to be clarified, and the way these cases are subsequently handled needs to be approached in vastly different ways.

Do we have an obligation to reduce the number of children who are taken into care by introducing a new way of dealing with our families who've hit rough spots? Yes, I think we do.

Do we have an obligation to find a way to uplift these families, and teach them how to help themselves in ways that are not adversarial? Yes, I think we do.

Do we have an obligation to preserve the deep, genetic, familial bond a child has with the family it was born into? Yes, I think we do.

And finally, do we have an obligation to prevent - to whatever way possible - the devastating and abiding trauma that a child suffers when he is taken from the "less than high income", "less than well-educated", "less than almost perfect" family he was born into; the family he is permanently bonded to; the family he has loved with his whole heart; for his whole young life? Absolutely. We have an obligation to prevent that.

Can we take this approach 100% of the time with 100% of the families who come to the attention of our child welfare agency? Of course not. In 2015, out of all the homes under investigation by DHS as a result of incoming reports, 28.7% of those children could not remain safely in their homes, and needed the support of foster care. But that was 28.7% What about the others? As I said earlier, what about the child who was left to play in his front or back yard; what about the child who skipped school; the parent who missed a doctor's appointment; the parent who serves meals that lack nutrition; the parent who has to take their child to the ER and subsequently asks for a second opinion; dental neglect; guilt by association (only one parent needs serious support); and the most tragic of all - poverty. I will say it again. These are reasons for which children have been removed both in the past, and currently. And they are not good enough reasons.

I support HB 4009 and support our families in Oregon by reducing the need for Foster Care.

Chair Baker and members of the committee I would also like to present to you a letter sent to the Foster Care Reduction Project following the Oregon State Audit. Please listen to our children if you listen to no others.

I am also including a Blog from Richard Wexler of the NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM (NCCPR) Mr. Wexler makes some very valid points and those I will highlight in oral testimony.

Thank You Chair Barker and committee for your time.