

Chairs Nosse and Beyer, members of the committee,

For the record my name is Peter Drummond, and I am an SEIU 503 member. I am a permanency worker in Child Welfare in the Portland Alberta office. I love my job, and I have done this work for 5 years.

By now reports of the struggles at Child Welfare have become well known, as employees of DHS, the media, partner agencies, and families in the child welfare system have all described how the agency has failed in its mission to protect children; allegations of abuse and neglect by parents and foster parents alike go uninvestigated or unaddressed, and children languish in foster care while parents are unable to access the services and supports to allow for reunification. Parties have forewarned of pending disaster should systemic reform not be made, but the simple fact is that grim prognostication is no longer adequate, as the agency and its workers have long passed the breaking point. Caseworkers have desperately tried to keep things together, with countless stories of long hours worked both on and off the clock to manage caseloads almost triple the maximum, to pick up the slack due to the lack of foster parents or adequate caregivers, to provide visitation or transportations due to short staffing, and to provide therapeutic support and crisis management to an underfunded and inadequate mental health system. These sacrifices are not made out of any financial or personal gain, but due to a moral obligation to see to the protection of children and the betterment of our community, yet our ability to make them is ever decreasing. Employees have experienced deteriorating mental health, increased access to stress leave and FMLA, received frustration, anger, and abuse from our clients and partners out of our inability to meet the obligations of our agency, all while pay and benefits have failed to keep up with rising cost of living. As a result, we fail to retain veteran employees, who leave for better pay and less misery, and are unable to recruit new talent, as those who do join Child Welfare are quickly overwhelmed and leave.

Without immediate and bold action to address the needs of employees, the direct cost of that failure is passed along to the children and families we serve. I personally have seen my children fall prey to recruitment by gangs and human traffickers, going missing before turning up halfway across the country. Their mental health and addiction needs are unmet, and I find my children living in homeless camps, drug houses, or at the hospital emergency room due to drug overdose or suicide attempt. I've had to send children a thousand miles away, spending vast amounts of money to uproot them from their communities and lives because we lack placements and services in Oregon. These children lose faith in the system and their ability to attach and respect adults in their lives, as the neglect and inattentiveness they experience sends a clear and powerful message, that their community and the state of Oregon do not care. Without the change we are asking for, this will continue.

The question posed is simple, whether this committee and the state of Oregon truly believe in the need to protect and support unsafe children. You have the opportunity to vote to fully and adequately fund the agency and its employees by supporting DHS' ask for 100% staffing, or to continue allowing this dysfunction to spread, in which case the suffering experienced by the children and families of Oregon will be a direct result of your inaction.

Thank you for your time.

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