

To: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Human Services
From: Michelle Puggarana
Date: February 26, 2019

Chairs Nosse, Beyer and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Michelle Puggarana and I am a Training Specialist at Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette, where I serve as a trainer and educator supporting a variety of youth-serving organizations, teachers, and other educators on comprehensive sex education curriculum.

I am here today speaking in support of the *“Healthy Relationships Education and Supports for Foster Youth”* item within the proposed Child Welfare Budget.

This program proposal was developed directly from a request and recommendation of foster youth from across the state.

We know that youth in foster care:

- Are twice as likely to have an unintended pregnancy than their peers;
- Have birth rates 60% higher than the general population;
- Are tested or treated for STIs at more than four times that national average;
- Have high rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma;
- Are at high risk for sexual exploitation and trafficking; AND
- Do not consistently get school-based sexual health education;

Programs that incorporate high quality sexual health education have been shown to help young people develop healthier relationships and reduce sexual health disparities. Programs like this also support youth learning to recognize signs of abuse. This education includes information and skills development related to topics addressing human development, healthy relationships, personal advocacy, and sexual health.

In 2016-2017, I had the opportunity to work with two independent livings skills programs in Oregon on a pilot project to provide comprehensive sexual health education to youth in foster care. We surveyed youth, case managers, and foster parents and developed a program built around their needs.

After I provided training to the facilitators of these programs, I observed a final 9 week curriculum. I was struck by the high level of participation and engagement of youth participants, despite the many barriers that these youth face every day. This reinforced that youth want and need this information.

- At the end of that group one youth said that *“this was the first place I ever felt safe enough to talk about who I am, my real gender, and to think about how I can keep myself safe from STDs.”*
- Another young woman explained that this program shed light on an unhealthy relationship she was in after she learned ways to respond to interactions where she may feel pressured not to use a condom.

Because I have seen firsthand the positive impact comprehensive sex ed for foster youth can have, I ask the committee to support funding for the *“Healthy Relationships Education and Supports for Foster Youth”* program. Youth in foster care deserve to have the knowledge and skills to build healthy futures, healthy relationships, and to learn how to keep themselves safe by recognizing the warning signs of unhealthy behavior and circumstances. Oregon has the opportunity to support them. They deserve it. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.