

SB 814 Hearing Testimony

- My name is Shari Levine.
- I'm the Director of Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS) and have been with the agency for 26 years.
- Over the past 34 years we've placed over 1,500 children in open adoption families and become the experts in open adoption in the NW, and now national spokespeople.

Foster care crisis in OR

- DHS staff work hard to protect children from abuse and neglect, but the system is overburdened. Too many kids are entering foster care.
- DHS had resorted to hoteling kids, and most recently sending our most vulnerable children to out of state to for-profit residential agencies that are reportedly run like correctional facilities in which children are commonly physically restrained. This option is not only heartbreaking and further traumatizing to these children, it's extremely expensive. DHS has spent \$2.5 million in 3 months housing 84 children.
- We all know about the ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences Study) that demonstrates this trauma will negatively impact these children, and 84% of OR foster kids) for the rest of their lives.

- I don't know how to fix foster care, but I do have a successful and viable alternative.
- By partnering with DHS we can keep kids out of the system, give them early permanency at NO COST to taxpayers.
- Through SB 814, OR has an opportunity to be a national leader in child welfare innovation.

- By proactively planning an open adoption, at-risk moms can choose the adoptive parents and form a lifelong extended family relationship with them. She's actively involved as her child grows and thrives.
- She has a voice in her child's future and keeps them out of foster care.

- In our process family preservation is achieved by adding family and support. The birth and adoptive extended families become the safety net.
- This recognizes the child's need to include their birth family in their life, and the birth parent's need not to be separated from their child.
- We have been doing this successfully for years; it has been a win/win for everyone.

DHS Culture:

- Many moms in the system believe the only type of adoption that's available to them is a DHS adoption. They see this as a process, in which they fail.
- In fact, a mom has to fail for a DHS adoption to happen; but she doesn't have to fail in our strengths-based open adoptions.
- Parenting doesn't have to be an either/or proposition. Currently, reunification is associated with success, and adoption with failure. The mom either wins or loses her child; she's either rewarded or punished and there's no choice in the middle.
- Our open adoptions give struggling moms a choice in the middle. She's not severing ties with her child; she's actively involved in their life.

Differences between OAFS & DHS open adoption:

- The DHS process isn't the mom's choice, with our agency it is.
- By the time the child is adopted, they've spent an average of 3 years in the system. Heavily impacted by ACES.
- After months/years of not meeting reunification goals, the mom's relationship with DHS becomes more adversarial; she feels like a failure.
- Although she may be offered a voluntary relinquishment and a contact agreement to avoid a TPR hearing she's still not choosing a family based on her aspirations for her child. She has no voice.
- There's no relationship training or ongoing guidance for the birth and adoptive parents. Often the birthmom fades away.

How SB 814 will Make a Difference?

- Currently DHS allows moms to pro-actively plan an open adoption, but this alternative is not being fully utilized.
- Moms can't access it if they doesn't know it exists.
- There needs to be a transparent conversation with the mom before her child is removed about what her options are: reunification possibly culminating in a DHS adoption, or pro-actively planning an open adoption.
- Then she can truly make an informed and empowering choice regarding their child's future.

- Through this paradigm shift, we can destigmatize the way these struggling moms are seen so they're not defined by their limitations.
- Maybe she can't succeed at being a full-time parent at this point in her life, but she can succeed as a birthparent, and that means everything to her and her child.
- It's important she knows about this option and can access it later as a back-up plan if a state adoption becomes imminent.
- We can provide free trainings to DHS, CPS and Self-Sufficiency workers statewide on how to talk with moms about their adoption options.
- Our goal is to partner with DHS to help lighten their load and bring options to struggling moms and their children.