

The Honorable Jackie Winters, Co-Chair  
The Honorable Carla Piluso, Co-Chair  
Members of the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety  
900 Court Street Salem, OR 97301  
Re: HB5541

Dear Co-Chairs and Members of the Committee:

My name is Shelley Bohlken and I am a foster parent for Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) in Eugene. I'm writing to ask you to fund OYA at its current service level and to consider additional investments that would help it mitigate risks in key areas. I am also writing as a person committed to a justice system that keeps our communities safe by holding youth accountable while providing them with the skills they need to achieve reformation. Adding staff in strategic roles such as mental health, skill development, culturally-responsive services for underserved youth, foster care, and staff recruitment could do a lot to help the agency mitigate identified risks to its initiatives and to the youth it serves. I am particularly interested in encouraging you to include a full-time position for a foster home recruiter.

As you know, the agency's mission is to provide the youth in its care with the skills they need to lead crime-free lives in our communities and I believe an integral part of that is in providing foster care for appropriate OYA youth. I have been a foster parent for almost 2 years and have seen the need for foster families over and over during that time. I recently learned that there are only 28-30 foster homes state-wide for OYA youth, only 7 of which are certified for girls. This is in spite of the fact that OYA is currently contracted for 72 beds. As of Monday March 4, there were 23 youth on a waiting list for foster placement; 17 males and 6 females. There are so many benefits to foster care as opposed to close-custody or a residential treatment program, not the least of which is financial. A day in either facility certainly costs much more than a day in foster care does. Other benefits of foster care include:

1. It is the only place in the entire OYA system for youth to see what living with a healthy family looks like. Most of the youth in the OYA system have never had the opportunity to live with a stable, healthy family. In a foster home they have the opportunity to learn pro-social skills as they become integrated into a family.
2. The ability to learn life skills such as opening a bank account, budgeting, paying bills, menu planning and grocery shopping, maintaining a home, finding a job and consistently working, keeping a schedule and making appointments, etc.
3. Being able to connect with an adult who will teach them, encourage them, and advocate for them. I asked my foster daughter on Monday what she felt the benefit of living in a foster home instead of a residential treatment program was (she has lived in both). Her reply was "knowing you have supporters ~ knowing you have people around you to help you out. When I mess up I feel more free to talk because I feel more secure. I like knowing you're available when I mess up or something is going on." She said that she feels more supported because it's easier to connect one-on-one with someone in a home than it is with staff in a residential treatment program that may or may not be consistent.

Why is a full-time recruiter position needed?

1. Right now recruiting is being done by the certifiers, but their time is very limited. They have their own duties: certifying and training new foster parents (there is also a state-mandated time constraint in completing all the interviews, training, and write ups for each foster home), monthly home visits to each foster home, weekly phone calls to each foster home, yearly recertification of all foster homes, taking

referrals for needed foster homes, etc. But still, when the opportunity is available to set up a booth at a community event, they are there speaking to the public and trying to recruit foster parents. And while that is needed, they have little to no time to follow up with those folks who are interested.

2. A full time recruiter would be available to follow up after those community events, more time to attend community events and speak to groups, time to increase an online presence, and time to “advertise” the need. I have been a volunteer in my local county juvenile justice system for about 10 years and for OYA for about 5 years. In spite of that I had no idea that OYA even needed foster care. One day I was visiting a youth in close custody. I had been mentoring him for about 2 years and he asked me if I would consider being his foster parent. Of course, I said yes and immediately applied to be a foster parent. After he left I agreed to continue fostering, which I absolutely love. I would venture a guess that most OYA volunteers are unaware of the foster care program.

I have received a phenomenal amount of support as a foster mom. I became a foster parent when I was 64 years old. I have never been married and never raised any children and now all of a sudden I was the parent of an 18 year old young man! It was a steep steep learning curve for me but my foster home certifier was always available to talk to. Both she and that young man’s PO were so helpful, so supportive, so encouraging, and more importantly extremely patient with me as I learned. I absolutely love being a foster parent and like to think that I’ve made a difference in the lives of some of the youth I have come into contact with. To have someone with the specific goal of recruiting foster parents would be a very positive addition to OYA that would not only have a positive financial impact but also, I believe, a positive youth outcome. Please make a commitment to fund this very needed position.

I urge you to do all you can to support the wonderful work that OYA is doing with Oregon’s youth and continue the momentum it has developed.

Thank you,

Shelley Bohlken