



School
of Social Work

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

March 11, 2019

Chair Gelser, Vice-Chair Heard, and Members of the Committee,

Re: SB 745

My name is Jennifer Blakeslee, and I am a research assistant professor in the Portland State University School of Social Work. For the past ten years, starting when I was a graduate student working with youth in foster care, I have been involved in developing and evaluating programming for older foster youth as my area of expertise. Additionally, I am a member of a national network of researchers that studies the challenges experienced by this population and related strategies to improve direct services and programming. For the last five years, I have also been the evaluation partner for the New Avenues for Youth agency in Portland, which currently houses the largest ILP program in the state—in this role, I have provided technical assistance to Oregon DHS around ILP design and delivery, including the kinds of programming that can be introduced if SB 745 passes.

From this perspective, if you had asked me a year ago what is the first thing I would do to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care in Oregon, I would have answered, “Increase state investment in the Independent Living Program.” So I was thrilled to hear that youth themselves had chosen this as a policy priority, for a number of reasons.

First, I have personally heard many youth express what they are saying as a group through OFYC—that very often, their ILP worker plays a uniquely important mentoring and coaching role in preparing them for transition. I think that is partly because ILP workers tend to be engaging and energetic advocates for youth, able to quickly build rapport and help youth identify goals that are important to them—and many youth find that their ILP worker is accessible and flexible in a way that DHS caseworkers are often not able to be. Additional investment in the ILP will support these dedicated workers by reducing caseloads and allowing them to spend more time with each youth they serve.

Next, ILP is a service structure that is ripe for investment to both increase eligibility and to introduce a more developmental programming approach. SB 745 will allow two new age cohorts to receive ILP services, which can be designed to focus on typical developmental needs. For example, research shows that 14-15 year olds benefit from positive youth development programming, with mentoring and structured peer group activities designed to build internal assets they’ll need to succeed in high school and beyond. Because this will be a newly eligible cohort, DHS is planning to implement a new group-oriented programming approach guided by the evidence about what works with this age group.

Similarly, young adults up to age 23 often need a particular kind of support to prevent typical challenges from becoming a larger crisis, especially when they no longer have a DHS caseworker—extending eligibility allows these young people to maintain a formal connection to access services and support as needed, much as young adults in general typically continue to rely on parents for resources and information at this age.

Further, we know from research that 16-20 year-olds in foster care have a range of strengths and challenges—while many are doing relatively well overall, we know that a large subgroup (about 40% in some studies) is more likely to experience placement instability, mental health challenges, and limited support and resources, to name only a few barriers to successful transition to adulthood. Increased investment will allow providers the flexibility to serve the range of youth eligible for ILP—not just those who readily benefit from ILP services, but also those who are struggling and who need more time and effort before they are ready to engage in transition planning activities at all.

For example, the existing service model for 16-20 year-olds requires monthly meetings with an ILP worker, although many youth want and need more regular in-person support. The additional funding through SB 745 will be used to introduce a more intensive evidence-based approach for an identified subgroup of youth with higher needs, allowing ILP workers to meet with them weekly instead of monthly, with a specific focus on self-determination skills like youth-directed goal-setting, problem-solving, and self-regulation.

Lastly, additional investment in ILP increases statewide capacity for program evaluation and continuous improvement. One of the strengths of Oregon's ILP is the rich network of local agencies providing services in their communities, including culturally-specific programs, and agencies with dedicated staff for LGBTQ youth or those with mental health challenges. Increased investment would expand the capacity of local agencies to work with DHS staff to develop sustainable programming best-suited to their communities.

In closing, I am so happy to see this bill move forward as a youth-driven policy proposal, for the reasons outlined above and many more. I urge you to support SB 745, and I appreciate the opportunity to share why I think this legislation will meaningfully improve outcomes for Oregon youth transitioning from foster care.



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