



Oregon CASA Network

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TESTIMONY OF DEBRA A. GILMORE CEO, OREGON CASA NETWORK

Chair Keny-Guyer, Vice Chairs Noble and Sanchez, and Members of the Committee:

Oregon CASA Network asks you to support HB2570 so that Oregon's local CASA programs can provide best interests advocacy to more than 7,000 children traumatized by abuse and neglect and continue building capacity to serve all of the more than 11,000 Oregon children who enter our child welfare court system every year due to abuse or neglect.

Oregon statutes guarantee every abused and neglected child who enters our court system that they will have a Court Appointed Special Advocate – a CASA – appointed to advocate for their best interests. Local CASA programs simply lack the funding to meet the need.

Local communities and citizens are doing their part to support local CASA programs. State funding currently accounts for **only 17%** of total funding for CASA programs statewide. The rest of the funds come largely from communities – individuals, businesses, and foundations, as well as federal Victims of Crime Act funds. Our CASA volunteers also contributed more than 250,000 hours of time providing best interests advocacy last year – a value of more than \$6 million.¹ With those investments, we were able to serve 45% of Oregon's abused and neglected children. Unfortunately, **55% of Oregon children in state care went without an advocate.**

We are asking the state to invest a total of \$8.3 million in local CASA programs in 2019-21, and in return, local CASA programs will recruit, screen, train, supervise, support, and diversify CASA volunteers to serve at least 7,032 Oregon foster children in the next biennium.

Many, if not all of you, know from your personal experiences and those of the people surrounding you, the qualitatively positive difference that CASA volunteers make in the lives of the children they advocate for. A CASA volunteer uses their training to investigate the child's lived experiences, listens to and understands the child's life through the child's lens, and stays laser-focused on the child's needs and wishes. On any given day, and with the support of knowledgeable CASA program staff, that might be advocating for evidence-based parent-child therapy, dental care, or consistent sibling visits. It might mean

¹ Based on Independent Sector's estimated value of volunteer time in Oregon at \$24.89/hour.



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advocating in court to ensure caretakers follow-through on testing for learning disabilities or gifted status in school, advocating for tap shoes and tap lessons or a new football or violin for home practice, or advocating for a youth's foster parent to become their permanent guardian or adoptive parent and an aunt to have routine weekend time with the youth – because that best meets that particular youth's needs and fulfills her sense of belonging.

There is also a quantifiable return on investing in CASA volunteers. Studies have shown that children with a CASA volunteer spend less time in foster care, are less likely to return to foster care, are less likely to demonstrate poor conduct in school, and are more likely to pass all courses in school.² A 2017 study estimated the annual national savings from spending less time in foster care and not returning to care to be over \$800 million.³ A 2011 Oregon study determined the average annual net savings to this State for each child adopted out of foster care to be \$17,636.⁴ Simply put, investing less than \$2,000 per Oregon foster child is likely to result in significant net savings to the State. And giving every child who has experienced the trauma of abuse or neglect the ability to be safe, have necessary supports, and to thrive through the advocacy of caring, consistent volunteers is an investment in Oregon's future.

Thank you for your consideration and support.

² National CASA Association. (2018). *Advocacy in action: Resources to improve safety, permanency, and well-being*. Seattle, WA: Author.

³ Id.

⁴ Fixsen, A. (2011, November). *Children in foster care: Societal and financial costs*. Eugene, OR: A Family for Every Child. Retrieved from https://www.afamilyforeverychild.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/children_in_foster_care.pdf