

Dear Chairwoman Gelser and members of the Health Committee,

My name is Sara Soltani, I am parental rights advocate and I am here today to ask you to pass SB653. Issues within Oregon's DHS child welfare system were first brought to my attention by Brittany Ruiz, the bills author. She expressed to me the need families have for support during this very emotional, painful process, so I began volunteering and have attended DHS home visits, pre-trial hearings, doctor, specialist, and attorney appointments with several different families.

In the beginning, one case in particular caught my attention. After reading through their case file, and medical records, it became very clear to me that the system was intentionally working against them by refusing to look into medical causes, presuming guilt until proven innocent while trying to prevent the submission of evidence absolving them of guilt. I was so moved by this case, that I opened my guest home and my heart to this family, and my experience going through this process with them is not one I will soon forget. To keep their babies out of the foster system, these parents had been sleeping in their car so they could afford for their children to remain safely in their home with maternal grandmother flown in from California. The lengths they would go to so they could see their kids everyday, driving to drop off their car for grandma and children so that she could drive the kids to DHS for supervised visits, while they took an Uber there and back. This system is supposed to seek reunification, yet I have not seen it put forth any effort to facilitate it despite the funding and resources to do so. A lot of what I have seen is unfair and unjust and does not serve Oregonians.

My eyes were again opened when I was made aware of an abused and neglected dog. When I coordinated with the neighbor to attempt to get the owner of the dog to surrender him to me, I then learned of and was witness to horrific living conditions and treatment of 2 very young children by the mother in this household. Despite my documentation of, the neighbors continued surveillance of, multiple hotline attempts, police calls by at least 5 different parties, meeting with the caseworker personally, emails to supervisors, and legislators....the same agency I had been observing that is so quick to remove children from loving parents, absolutely refused to intervene and help these 2 toddlers, despite their older 2 siblings already being removed for abuse from this mother. My point in sharing this with you today, is to explain that i've been on both sides of these scenarios. I see flaws in a system I feel has little oversight, and I feel like this bill has the potential to right some of the wrongs these families have had to endure so that in the future, there will be more due process and accountability, and in the end more children will be saved from actual harm.

Thank you for your time,

Sara Soltani