

# Testimony to support HB 4096

*Submitted to the House Committee on Business and Labor*

*February 4, 2020*

By Tim Rusk, Executive Director at MountainStar Family Relief Nursery in Central Oregon

Dear Chair Barker and Committee members,

I have been working as Executive Director at the Central Oregon Relief Nursery since 2002. I was hired a year after this Relief Nursery started when our budget was mostly State funded at \$350K. We served 34 children per year, and our building was 1,200 sq. feet of space in Bend. Now, our budget is \$2.1M with over half coming from the private sector, we serve 300 children annually, employ 31 staff, and operate in Bend, Madras, and Prineville. We are right on the brink of opening a Relief Nursery center in Redmond - thanks to funding made available through the Student Success Act.

If you don't know Oregon Relief Nurseries, we are a public/private partnership that started in Eugene in the late 70's and have grown to 31 programs throughout the State. We provide early-childhood, child abuse prevention services. Our classroom and home visiting services are designed to prevent abuse and neglect for the population that makes up 45% of the victims - children 0-5 years old.

We act to protect children about as up-stream as it gets - in early childhood. DHS/Child Welfare recently did an internal study looking at data over a 9-year period to see if children enrolled in Relief Nursery services were also clients of Child Welfare. Over 90% of the children enrolled in the Relief Nursery did not appear in the DHS system despite their families having many, many challenges. At MountainStar, we document similar safety outcomes based on information from families. We also document progress in social emotional development and family protective factors. Trauma, chaos, and repeated crises in childhood can cause big problems later in life. Dr. Nadine Burke-Harris has a powerful TED talk on the topic if you want to learn more.

My comments above are to establish some credibility for my message. I have been working in the early childhood world for almost 20 years. I have also been active at the State and regional level including the Governor's appointment to several early committees and I am current Chair of the Early Learning Leadership Council - otherwise known as the Central Oregon Early Learning Hub.

My message is that barriers to establishing childcare programs are a problem in our state. Central Oregon, like many other communities around our State, is a childcare desert as seen in the attached map from 2019 Oregon State University [Oregon's Child Care Deserts](#).

Childcare is expensive in addition to being hard to find. Oregon's Children's Institute documents the situation in an article published January 4, 2019. Families can expect to spend \$8,655/year for licensed, home-based care, \$15,736/year for center-based care, and a "jaw-dropping" \$30,686/year for center-based care that meets the highest level of quality standards.

From my perspective, the business model in the child-care industry has big structural challenges. We haven't even talked about staff wages, employee turn-over, and professional development. The problem can be framed in simple economic terms - despite plenty of "demand", there is not enough "supply".

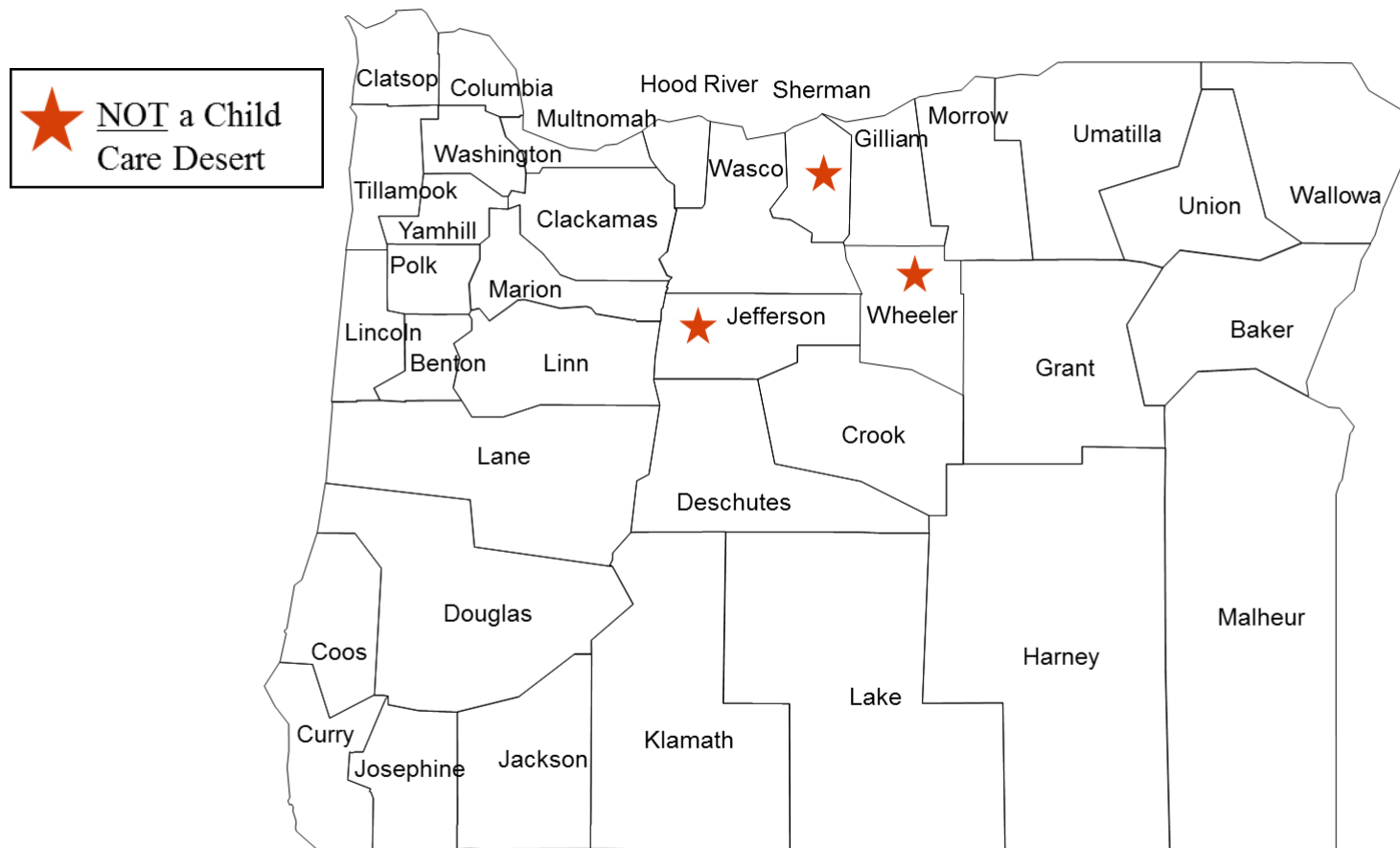
The groups that suffer from this market break-down are many. I focus on infants and young children with their rapidly growing brains. Dr. Lally, in his book "For Our Children: Ending the Invisible Neglect of America's Infants", talks about the need for a "social womb" that protects a child's phase of rapid growth after birth. There is a vast and growing body of research documenting the developmental significance of the first 1,000 days of a child's life. There is also a lot research documenting the break-down of informal supports that families used to rely on for high-quality childcare and coverage when someone got sick.

Another group that suffers from the lack of high-quality, affordable childcare is employers. The Bend Chamber of Commerce has picked up this issue and made it a priority. They have surveyed members and held listening sessions throughout Central Oregon. Staff from the US Chamber of Commerce came to our area to better understand the connection between the supply of childcare and a successful business environment. They were also very interested in what could be done to make the situation better. Studies and listening groups are an important part of the process, but it takes bold action to change the status quo.

HB 4096 makes Oregon's childcare industry better. MountainStar staff spent hundreds of hours looking for a site for a new Relief Nursery in Redmond. The zoning and regulatory challenges were profound, and we were close to abandoning our effort. Fortunately, we attracted the attention of philanthropists who are helping us purchase a property and get started. It is the kind of thing that happens in the Relief Nursery world where we have staff focused on fundraising. It is much less likely for childcare centers.

Please support HB 4096. It represents the kind of action that can put our childcare industry back on track. Please get it done in this short session. I often remind audiences that everyday matters during the first 1,000 days of a child's life. Everyday matters to business, too. HB 4096 helps both.

**Map 2. For children age five and under, only 3 out of 36 counties are *not* child care deserts in Oregon.**



A child care desert is defined as a county with more than three young children for every child care slot.

Slots are defined as regulated child care slots, including Certified Centers, Certified Family, and Registered Family Providers.

**Data sources:** Access to child care is calculated by taking the Estimated Supply of Child Care in Oregon as of January 2018 (Analysis by Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, Oregon State University using data collected by 211 and the CCR&R system) and dividing it by the population of children in the county who fall in the age group (2017 Annual Population Report Tables, Portland State University Population Research Center).