

February 17, 2019

Testimony in Support of SB 1518

Dear Chair Keny Guyer, Vice Chair Noble and Committee Members,

I apologize that I am unable to join you in person this afternoon for the hearing on SB 1518 which comes to you unanimously from the Senate Human Services Committee. I'm particularly disappointed to miss the opportunity to speak about this bill because it is all about "good news." SB 1518 represents positive steps we can take to improve outcomes in our child welfare system and our child care programs.

SB 1518 is an omnibus bill that includes both needed technical fixes and commonsense new policies. I believe that Amy Joyce from the Early Learning Division will be present at the hearing to discuss the provisions of the bill that will allow the agency to make provisional approvals of background checks while awaiting a response from an out of state agency. This is consistent with what we allow for people who care for children through the Department of Human Services. A second element of the fix ensures that the agency is able to restore eligibility to provide child care services to individuals who were removed from the central registry due to paperwork or other minor/clerical errors. These fixes are critical for maintaining and growing the availability of affordable, quality child care for working families.

SB 1518 also takes the needed next step towards implementation of the prevention aspects of the Family First Act by directing the Department to develop, by rule, the definition of what would make a child and family eligible to receive services supported by funds that will be newly available beginning on July 1. This definition is important so that Oregon is able to be creative and nuanced in its delivery of prevention and support services to families who are at risk of being separated. We know that children do better when they can remain safely with their families. Family First, and a robust definition for eligibility, will help us reduce the number of children coming into foster care and keep families united as often as possible.

SB 1518 also places in statute non-discrimination language that has been present at the federal level. This is language that ensures that when loving adults step forward to care for or support children and families in need they are not prohibited from doing so based on religion, sexual orientation, disability, marital status or other factors. The bill also clarifies that an individual cannot be precluded from being a child welfare services provider on the sole basis that they experienced child welfare services in their childhood or youth. Indeed, these individuals have the kind of expertise we need in our system. Of course, it is important to note that although the bill does prohibit discrimination based on age it does not require the Department to approve teenagers as foster parents. There are other factors, besides age, which would preclude a minor from assuming the responsibilities of foster care.

The bill also proactively protects the right of children and youth in care to speak for themselves. It ensures that they can speak about their experience in care without fear of censorship or retaliation. As Oregon Foster Youth Coalition and others have demonstrated, our policies are better when they are informed by those who experience services. We need more youth to be empowered to educate us, to help us understand their experiences, and to have the right to tell their own stories without filter.

Finally, this bill offers the unique opportunity to reduce the number of children in foster care through what we are referring to as an "adoption surge." Quite simply, this provision will prioritize the finalization of a backlog of adoptions that are delayed due to paperwork issues. Today, we have over

7000 children and youth in foster care. Among those are approximately 700 children (according to an estimate provided last fall by DHS) who are legally free for adoption AND have already been matched with their adoptive families. SB 1518 will direct the Department to prioritize the completion of these adoptions by getting the needed paperwork submitted to the court by the end of the summer. It is important to note that if there is an objection to the adoption placement by any party or an objection to adoption by the child or youth, that situation will not be eligible for prioritization through this “adoption surge.” Instead, this is focused on clearing the backlog for those cases where paperwork is the issue.

If successful, the adoption surge could result in a nearly 10% reduction in our foster care population which also means a reduction in workload and caseload for DHS workers. Until the adoptions are completed, each of these children and youth are carried on a caseworkers caseload, requiring monthly visits, approvals for travel, and involvement in decisions about medical and dental care and more. DHS participated in drafting the language for this measure and plans to complete this work with existing resources through a collaboration with Casey Family Programs. Further, the Department is required to report back to the Legislature this fall about any barriers to completing these adoptions and information about what future appropriations would be needed to ensure timely adoption processes moving forward.

SB 1518 is an exciting Child Welfare bill because it is focused on things we can all feel good about—empowering youth voice, preserving and expanding child care capacity, increasing the population of adults able to provide services, expanding in home services to prevent removal to foster care, and helping hundreds of children and families realize the certainty of legal adoption. SB 1518 is also exciting because it outlines achievable goals that will have measurable, meaningful outcomes that we can all see in the short term. This will help build morale and enthusiasm around the tremendous efforts coming out of our child welfare system.

Thank you for considering this measure. It received unanimous support in the Senate Committee and on the Senate floor. I hope it finds a similar fate in the House and makes its way to the Governor’s desk as quickly as possible.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with any questions you might have. Though I am unable to be in the building today, most of you have my cell phone number and if you do not the Senate caucus office or Chair Keny Guyer can make it available to you.

Sincerely,
Sara

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