



YAMHILL COUNTY CASA PROGRAM
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Dear Oregon House of Representatives,

I am writing in support of expanding upon the current Tuition and Fee Waiver for Foster Youth in Oregon. As it stands, The Foster Youth Tuition and Fee Waiver is for undergraduate students who were in the care and custody of Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS), or one of the nine federally recognized Tribes in Oregon. Former foster youth must have spent at least 180 days in foster care after age 14 and did not leave the care and custody of ODHS or the Tribe prior to the youth's 16th birthday. The undergraduate student must also access the Tuition and Fee Waiver prior to the age of 25.

According to the 2021 Oregon Child Welfare Data book, a total of 8,620 children spent at least one day in foster care in Oregon in 2021; of those children 2616 were teens. Life in foster care is traumatizing regardless of the age of the child, but I believe being a teen in foster care is a much more intense and negative experience. Not only are they grappling with whatever trauma brought them into ODHS care, they have all the social stigmas and typical teenage pressures to endure. In addition, like all young adults, they also must look ahead and plan for their own future. Young adults stepping into adulthood have an easier path to success when they have a strong support network around them, which is hard to come by in an overburdened child welfare system.

In addition to being the Executive Director for my county's CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) Program, I am a CASA volunteer for a youth who has been in and out of care since she was born. Her parents struggled with addiction, which lead to violence, anger, and neglect and although she hides her scars well, she is deeply impacted by the labels she carries; some she gave herself, some were given to her by adults in her life that didn't understand the impact of chronic trauma on a child's brain. She has been called damaged, unlovable, worthless, difficult, problem-child, unintelligent, and unteachable. The young person I have had the opportunity to get to know is deeply compassionate, funny, and bright. She stands up for what she believes in and can't stand watching others get picked on or hurt. She enjoys learning, and although middle school can be overwhelming at times, she is looking forward to high school and college. She wants to be a police officer or a therapist. She wants to help other children like her. In 2020, her parents' rights were terminated, and she was legally freed for adoption.

Unfortunately, at about the same time, she hit adolescence and began expressing her trauma, her anger, and all those big emotions in destructive ways, making it hard for her to find a stable placement and she ended up crashing through placement after placement, some regular foster homes, some residential facilities.

A few weeks ago, she celebrated her 14th birthday. Her current foster mom has known this youth since she came into care, loves her unconditionally, and wants to adopt her. She is single and has a modest income, making sending a child to college beyond her means. As a result, this youth, who hungers for permanency, for a family, for ODHS to be out of her life, who wants to grow up to help others, must choose between finalizing the adoption or keeping her case open another two years to qualify for the tuition waiver.

A total of 272 current and former foster care youth took advantage of the tuition waiver for higher education for the 2020-2021 school year (2021 DHS DATA Book). According to the Education Data Initiative, 203,759 students enrolled in Oregon Colleges during that time frame. Even if the number of current or former foster youth applying for the tuition waiver doubled or tripled, it is still a very small percentage of the college bound youth in Oregon. Giving these young people access to college can break generational cycles of substance use, poverty, child abuse and neglect. Any barrier we can eliminate, any help we can give them towards a stronger path in life, is worth investment.

I support expanding the upon the current Tuition and Fee Waiver for Foster Youth in Oregon so that any child who has experienced abuse or neglect and wants to do more, be more, and have a better quality of life than those that came before them, can do so with one less barrier on their path to success.

Thank you,

Sarah Johnson

CASA Volunteer and Executive Director,

Yamhill County CASA