

"May 18th, 2021  
Supporting HB 2505

Chair Gelser, Members of the Committee,

My name is Hannah Royal, and I am currently 24 years old. I was in foster care in Coos, Douglas, and Benton counties from the ages of 14-21, and I am a member of the Advisory Committee and Legislative Action Team for Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC). OFYC is an advocacy group consisting of current and former foster youth whose mission is to improve the Oregon foster care system through advocacy, activism and leadership. I am writing this testimony to voice my support and share my personal story in how it relates to HB 2505.

During OFYC's policy conference this past summer, OFYC members elevated the need to eliminate bias in child welfare decisions, particularly during the removal process. The Governor's Child Foster Care Advisory Commission also elevated the need to fund a policy analyst position and increase Commission seats for the Governor's Child Foster Care Advisory Commission. Our groups, as well as ODHS and legislators have come together to combine these needs in the form of HB 2505.

Within Oregon's foster care system, historically marginalized communities are deeply impacted by racism, ableism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, and other systems of oppression, leading to injustices such as overrepresentation of these communities in the foster care system and underservice of family affirming resources. HB 2505 will work against such inequities to create a more just and equitable child welfare system.

While I was in foster care in high school, I was actually placed back with my mother for about 6 months before being placed back into foster care. My mother suffers from a serious mental illness, which she takes medication for and is a very loving, compassionate, and brilliant mother. During my time living with her during those 6 months in between foster care placements, my mother was inconsistently taking her medication, which led to her being unable to take care of me to the best of her ability. This eventually led to the decision by DHS to place me back into foster care. I believe that had my mom been properly supported to continue taking her medication, I would have never had to go back into foster care. I believe that there was ableism bias involved in the decision to place me back into foster care.

My story is not the only story where bias shows up in the decisions being made by child welfare professionals. Through my advocacy work with OFYC, I have heard many stories from current and former foster youth about how bias has affected them personally in their time in foster care, particularly bias in the removal process of youth from their biological families. In fact, the percentage of Indigenous children who were placed in foster care in FFY 2019 was 2.9 times higher than the percentage of Indigenous children in Oregon's child population. This sort of disproportionality is true for Black children in foster care in Oregon as well, with the percentage of Black children who were placed in foster care in FFY 2019 1.5 times higher than the percentage of Black children in Oregon's child population.

With HB 2505, which is in the governor's recommended budget, we are asking for a Child Welfare Equity Committee to be added to the existing Governor's Child Foster Care Advisory

Commission. The Governor's Child Foster Care Advisory Commission was established in 2016 to study the issues within Oregon's foster care system and advise the governor and the director of ODHS on those issues. This committee that would be added to the commission would prioritize membership to include child welfare stakeholders who represent historically marginalized communities who would come up with recommended actions ODHS and legislators can take to mitigate bias in child welfare decisions. This bill would also fund an ODHS policy analyst position to support the commission and expand membership seats on the commission from 11 to 13 in order to provide a greater diversity of members, particularly current and former foster youth.

We are asking you to support HB 2505 to strengthen the existing Governor's Child Foster Care Advisory Commission and create a Child Welfare Equity Committee, to recommend actions to address and remove bias from child welfare decisions. We believe individuals and families impacted by child welfare decisions deserve fair support without being burdened by bias and oppressive systems. Equitable treatment and access to hospitable services should be expected of child welfare decisions, anything less is oppressive to the youth and families in the state of Oregon. HB 2505 will set examples to be made of by others. With its success, HB 2505 gives a new foundation to the child welfare system as a whole. This foundation can be built upon to create a better, more equitable Oregon child welfare system in the future.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to voice my support for HB 2505.

Hannah Royal  
*Oregon Foster Youth Connection "*