

Greetings Co-Chair Lieber, Co-Chair Nosse and Members of the Committee,

My name is Nico Serra, I'm a mostly white passing, mixed race, queer and transgender person with disabilities. I sit on the board of directors at Real Choice Initiative, a nonprofit organization run by and for people with disabilities. I am also a former public school teacher and a dedicated volunteer for the Residential Facilities Ombudsman (RFO) program. I'm here today in support of HB5019 and specifically to request more staffing for the RFO program and Toni Larson.

I have been involved with the RFO program since the summer of 2018 and became a certified Ambassador in spring 2019. Besides the regular duties of an Ambassador, like going into residential homes and identifying potential cases for Deputies to follow up with, I have helped the RFO with many types of tasks including recruiting volunteers, testifying on behalf of the RFO in Salem, legislative advocacy and I've even created a video to get the word out to our populations about the program.

During the almost three years I've been involved, I've had the honor of working Toni Larson. She has been working with our populations for over 25 years and is dedicated to doing what is best for the individuals she is serving. Her knowledge, integrity and ability to spread the limited resources she has been given astonishes me. As some of you know, Oregon created the RFO program only five years ago and Toni has been tasked with advocating for our most complex and misunderstood populations as well as developing a her program from scratch. As a former school teacher, I can appreciate how truly difficult it is to juggle all of this. Like being a teacher, this work too requires a 'calling' and Toni Larson, her staff and volunteers all have their own calling to do this work.

We currently serve 10,000 Oregonians with severe to profound medical conditions in populations traditionally ignored by most of humanity throughout the ages. People living in residential facilities have mental health concerns, intellectual or developmental disabilities and in many cases, a combination of all three plus many other complicating life circumstances.

For example, when I was going into facilities, it was very common to meet individuals that could neither speak or move their bodies. Every time I have met such a person, I always ask the staff if they have established basic communication with them, like indicators for 'yes', 'no' or 'I don't know' responses. It is beyond heart wrenching to me that the people that spend day and night in the presence of other human beings answer in every single circumstance that they have NOT created basic communication strategies with their clients.

When someone living in this state is being abused or neglected they cannot simply pick up a phone and call for help. Individuals like the ones I've mentioned rely solely on Ombudsman, licensing, care workers, medical professionals, case workers, family members, neighbors, medical transportation drivers and other community members. We

collectively are the only lifelines for people that deserve so much better in the richest country in the history of humanity.

As we continue to build out the volunteer program and recruit people that have a calling for this type of work, we must at the same time really consider assigning more Deputies to the RFO program. The program currently has only five Deputies for 10,000 clients, that's a case load of approximately 2,000 people per Deputy. When considering the difficulty many residents experience in communicating alone, I hope the gravity of the situation sinks in that adding more Deputy staff positions to the essential RFO program is a relatively small ask.

People with disabilities are not objects to be cared for, we are individuals that deserve dignity, respect and independence, let alone our basic human rights of communications being acknowledged and honored. Adults and children with mental health concerns, intellectual and developmental disabilities must be pulled from the shadows of institutional life and into the center of our society so we can assure their humanity is honored.

Thank you for receiving my testimony and your thoughtful consideration of these matters.

Sincerely,
Nico Serra