



VOICES UNITED.  
OPPORTUNITY REIMAGINED.

February 24, 2021

House Committee on Human Services  
900 Court Street NE  
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Support for HB 2544

Chair Williams, Vice-Chair Leif, Vice-Chair Ruiz, and Members of the Committee,

Our Children Oregon's (OCO) mission is to be a voice and force for the common good for all Oregon children, ensuring all children have the resources and opportunities they need to reach their full potential. OCO is the result of the merger between two historic Oregon non-profits: The Children's Trust Fund of Oregon and Children First for Oregon. We elevate data and lived experience to prioritize children and center communities. We continue to connect a community of 115 advocates, coalitions, and organizations through The Children's Agenda, a legislative agenda championing equitable state legislative policies and shared investments to improve the lives of Oregon's children and their families.

**HB 2544: Expanding supports for unaccompanied houseless youth is part of the 2021 Children's Agenda.**

Unaccompanied houseless youth in Oregon face a unique set of challenges. These youth are on their own and not directly attached to family members, which means they often encounter greater barriers to accessing the supports and resources they need. This is even more true for youth of color and youth from other marginalized communities in Oregon. Data shows that:

- Oregon has the highest rate per capita of youth houselessness in the nation
- During the 2018-2019 school year, there were approximately 22,000 houseless students in our K-12 schools, including 3,700 unaccompanied youth
- Of these unaccompanied youth, 51% were youth of color, of which 1 in 3 (34%) were Black youth, and up to 40% were youth who identify as part of the LGBTQIA community

Even before the pandemic, the status quo was not working for Oregon's houseless youth. Now, COVID-19 has exacerbated one of the main factors that lead to unaccompanied houselessness among youth: family

**The Children's Agenda**

*is a broad slate of equitable investments and policy solutions to meet the holistic needs of Oregon children, youth, and their families.*



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financial distress. In addition to the economic impacts, as many as 3 in 4 houseless youth experience chronic medical conditions, which place them at greater risk during the pandemic.<sup>i</sup>

HB 2544 would provide several investments to strengthen Oregon's safety net for unaccompanied houseless youth. It includes \$2.4 million to expand Oregon's host home network, which enables many youth to stay in school or return to school by providing a place to stay, food, and a supportive family. Data shows that 94% of houseless students in Oregon with secondary (host) homes graduate from high school compared to just 54% without. The bill would also invest \$2 million to expand and enhance shelter and support services across the state including shelter facilities, outreach, culturally specific services, mental health or substance use services, and other transitional housing options. Providing greater access to these resources will help to stabilize many unaccompanied houseless youth's situations during this difficult time and open pathways for them to realize their dreams.

Oregon must act now to protect the health, safety, and well-being of unaccompanied houseless youth in our state. We urge you to support HB 2544.

From the Our Children Oregon Team,

Chis Coughlin, Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement Director

Peggy Ting, Policy Intern

Jenifer Wagley, Executive Director

View the 2021 Children's Agenda at [www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2021-childrens-agenda](http://www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2021-childrens-agenda)

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3328221/>