

Testimony in support of

SB531 to the Senate Committee On Education

1/24/2023 at 3:00 PM.

Good morning – Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB531.

My name is Karen Hedine and I am the CEO of the Walla Walla YMCA that serves the low income, predominantly agricultural communities of Milton-Freewater and Athena-Weston, Oregon. Over 30% of the youth and families in these communities are living in poverty. Outside of classroom education and afterschool sports during the school year, these small rural towns offer little to interest and occupy and support young children in the summer months. To help address this concern, for the past 10 years the Walla Walla YMCA has provided summer day camps in Milton-Freewater and in 2021 was asked by the Athena-Weston school district to provide summer programs there as well.

Traditionally, our summer camps were paid for by donations to the YMCA and modest fees paid by working parents - many of whom struggle to make ends meet. Often when a family was able support their child's camp experience it would be for a single week session, instead of the full summer, which meant the child was likely to spend the balance of the summer inside, unsupervised, playing on a screen, and at increased risk of getting into mischief. The Y endeavors to make camp affordable and accessible for all. We believe that no child should be turned away from a YMCA program for inability to pay. Yet as camp supply costs, field trip expenses and rising minimize wages have steadily increased the YMCA has sought ways to augment its ability to continue to offer high quality summer-long programs. Absent funding support, the need to reduce the duration of camps or the number of youth served are the alternatives that we strive to avoid.

In summer 2022, through the foresight and support of the Oregon legislature, we were able to provide summer-long weekly day camp experiences for 238 low income Oregon youth at no cost to their families. The Y supplemented the state's funding, which covered most but not all costs, with other grants and donations that together made it possible to provide free swim lessons, rent school buses for educational field trips to places many of the kids had never been to, and provide 1st Aid/CPR training for all summer counselors.

The ability to provide these vital summer-long camp programs results in numerous positive outcomes for youth by helping them:

- **Engage** through a STEM and social-emotional-based curriculum coupled with outdoor play that helps kids connect, learn and enjoy social interactions with their peers in a safe, supervised environment. Post-COVID the mental and behavioral health challenges faced by youth were notable. Camps helped ground and reconnect kids who were

struggling by giving them the support and resources needed when schools were out of session.

- **Increase self esteem and learn to become more self-reliant** as they explore their interests and discover their strengths and weaknesses; camps help teach responsibility, encourage exploration and provide a nurturing environment for a child to make decisions independently.
- **Become more resilient** - camp teaches the value of effort and helps kids believe in themselves as they overcome challenges with determination, patience and a drive to succeed.
- **Connect with nature** – which helps to stimulate all the senses. When a child is outdoors, they get to see, touch, hear, smell and sometimes even taste nature. Sensory development makes life richer, fuller and all-around more pleasurable. Outside, children are free to run, skip, jump, climb, laugh and breathe the fresh air. Plus, they get a healthy dose of Vitamin D from the sun.
- **Be physically active** - only one in three children is physically active every day, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Physical activity is crucial for heart health and maintaining a healthy weight, and it boosts confidence and helps manage stress.
- **Be intellectually engaged** – through activities that peak their curiosity and encourage problem solving.
- **Learn teamwork** and to respect differences as they build lifelong friends and memories.
- **Build community awareness** – through excursions that provide cultural awareness and enrichment, including visits to the Pendleton Woolen Mill and Tamástslikt Cultural Institute. Field trips are designed to encourage youth to learn about their community and to identify and take pride in the important cultural and agricultural contributions made in the region.

Summer camps also give Oregon high school and returning area college students **responsible summer jobs** that helps to provide **positive role models** for local youth.

And camps **support working parents**, especially in low income seasonal agricultural communities where parents often work 2-3 jobs in the summer.

Thank you for your consideration of allocating further funding to support Oregon youth through quality summer programs in 2023. While summers are short the outcome of a positive camp experience is lasting.

Karen Hedine, CEO
Walla Walla YMCA