



TO: Joint Committee On Ways and Means–Subcommittee On Human Services

FROM: Blair Stenvick, Communications Manager, Basic Rights Oregon

DATE: 2/15/2023

RE: Support for Governor Kotek's DHS Child Welfare Budget

Co-Chairs Campos and Valderrama and Committee Members,

I am writing on behalf of Basic Rights Oregon, and in my personal capacity as an Oregon foster parent, to ask you to approve Governor Tina Kotek's proposed budget for the ODHS Child Welfare department.

As the state's longest-serving LGBTQ2SIA+ advocacy organization, Basic Rights Oregon has a vested interest in making our child welfare system as robust as possible. Data tells us that LGBTQ2SIA+ youth are significantly more likely to become DHS-involved. And because not all foster parents have the education, training, or willingness to support LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, our youth are more likely to flounder in the system without a stable or supportive home.

Oregon has begun investing more in supporting all foster youth, and we need to continue making these investments. For example, KEEP groups provide ongoing training and support for foster parents, and Governor Kotek's proposed budget would continue building this resource. My wife and I had the honor of recently participating in a KEEP group specifically for foster parents of LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, and we valued both the real-world skill building and sense of camaraderie we felt with other participants. Being a foster parent is often a difficult and isolating experience, and can be doubly so for LGBTQ2SIA+ families. This source of connection through KEEP was hugely beneficial for us.

Another source of invaluable support for us and our foster son is his CASA (court-appointed special advocate). CASAs are crucial for foster kids because they exist outside of DHS, and don't have pre-existing connections to families of origin or resource families. In other words, they exist purely to fight for the youth's best interests. Our foster son has been in the system for years, and he often observes that his CASA has been with him longer than anyone else on his case. He has trust in her, and she knows him well enough to advocate for what he needs at school, in his home life, and with DHS. We need more funding to make sure every Oregon foster kid can have a CASA.

Being a foster parent is the greatest honor I have had in my life, and it is also the hardest thing I have ever done. Any foster parent will tell you that no kid comes to them



without unique needs or a history of trauma. Foster parenting is an all-consuming, rewarding experience, and we need more families to provide real homes for these kids. But our foster families need more support. My wife and I both have the privilege of being able to take paid parental leave, and we have flexible jobs which allow us to respond to crises and be available for our kids. We own our own home and can afford to use our personal income to supplement monthly payments from DHS, which only cover about one-third the average cost of caring for a child in the Pacific Northwest.

Not all families have these privileges, and that should not be a barrier to becoming foster parents. We need more funding to both recruit and retain foster parents, so that all Oregon foster youth—including LGBTQ2SIA+ youth—have the chance to live in a stable, caring and affirming home.

This Committee has the opportunity to make a real, material difference in the lives of foster youth and foster families. I urge you to not only maintain the current service level for the entire DHS Child Welfare department, but also to enhance the support the state offers foster resource families and children with the \$17M increase included in the Governor's Recommended Budget.

Thank you,

Blair Stenvick
Basic Rights Oregon