



COALITION OF ADVOCATES
FOR EQUAL ACCESS
FOR GIRLS

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means

Subcommittee on Public Safety

February 23, 2023

Re: Governor's 2023-25 OYA Budget, Supporting Funding for Permanent Staffing at Jackie Winters Transition Program and a Mental Health Position at Oak Creek

Honorable Co-Chairs Senator Sollman, Representative Evans and members of the Committee, my name is Pam Patton, as a founding member I am here representing the Coalition of Advocates for Equal Access for Girls, celebrating our 30th year as a proud voice for the needs and issues of girls and young women in Oregon. The Coalition is a statewide, all-volunteer, non-profit organization with a mission to ensure implementation of Oregon's *1993 Equal Access Statute* (ORS 417.270) that calls for "all State systems serving children under 18 years of age (such as the Oregon Youth Authority) to provide girls and young women with equity in access to gender-responsive services, treatment and facilities". To support State agencies in implementing this Statute the Coalition has over the years developed and published Guidelines and Handbooks and offered trainings on Gender-Responsive Standards and Trauma-Informed Practices for providing the most effective approaches when working with girls and young women. OYA has embraced these approaches and integrated them into both Oak Creek and the Jackie Winters Transition Program.

I am here today in support of OYA being funded for Permanent Staffing at the Jackie Winters Transition Program and for one additional Mental Health Position at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility for Young Women.

To give you a brief history of our relationship with the Oregon Youth Authority, the Coalition for Equal Access for Girls has worked in partnership with OYA since 1997. During the late 90's the Coalition worked in collaboration with OYA to open in March 1999 OYA's first and only Young Women's Transition Program (YWTP), the Corvallis House. And in February 2008, after 4 years of the Coalition again working in collaboration with OYA the Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility for young women was opened. In 2009 YWTP moved services from Corvallis to be housed within Oak Creek. Eventually a new building was completed, but it took until 2015 for the young women to move in. And permanent funding for YWTP wasn't finally secured until July of 2017.

Girls in the juvenile justice system are unique and differ substantially from boys in many areas. Criminal behavior means something different for girls than boys. Young women are far less delinquent than male youth and have different pathways to delinquency. Young women experience in much greater numbers than young men adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) such as trauma, family dysfunction, mental health disorders, and/or substance abuse disorders. Oak Creek is frequently the system of last resort for these young women (cisgender female and transgender youth).

Data on acuity and trauma the young women at Oak Creek have experienced tells the story of this need:

- 84% Abuse or have Dependence on drugs and/or alcohol
- 91% Diagnosed with a mental health diagnosis (higher for youth of color)
- 59% Documented history of sexual abuse (we believe the number is higher)
- 50% With history of being trafficked

Therefore, how young women express themselves and the unique needs of these young women in closed custody require a gender-responsive/gender expansive approach. **To provide that level of service necessitates an adequate number of staff and mental health professionals.** Research and experience show with adequate staffing staff have more time with and able to form relationships with young women, critical components to reaching and empowering young women. We also know that if you have smaller groups, they are safer. Girls need to feel safe!

To that end we support funding in the Governor's Budget for:

- 1. Four Permanent Group Life Coordinator 2 positions at the Jackie Winters Transition Program's, which will put them in equity with male programs.**
- 2. One Qualified Mental Health Professional (QMHP) at Oak Creek.**

I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak and for your consideration of the Coalition's recommendations.

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State and National Liaison

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