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April 21, 2023

To: Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and members of the Ways and Means Committee

Re: HB 2732

Kids FIRST in Lane County is an organization created to assist our community in responding to child abuse. Kids FIRST's mission is to provide intervention and advocacy for children who are victims of, or witnesses to, crime. forensic child abuse evaluations and support for children and their families who may have been impacted by abuse or neglect. The primary goal of Kids FIRST is to ensure that children (birth to 18 years of age) suspected to be victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and/or domestic violence are provided with quality evaluative and healing support services in a child-focused setting.

Kids FIRST urges support for HB 2732, maintaining the 2021 investment of \$6M in Children's Advocacy Centers. Children's Advocacy Centers have been working with the Legislature to increase state funding, and we are incredibly thankful that our \$6M funding request was included in the Christmas Tree bill last session. As you know, the Christmas Tree bill is just one-time funding, and CACs continually report that their greatest need is highly specialized staff. In fact, nearly every CAC reported using the 2021 funding for increased staff, or increased hours for existing staff.

For example, one Center used the funding to hire a bilingual therapist- a longstanding need for that community. Additional uses include purchase of new medical equipment, and facility repairs or expansions so that more kids can be seen. **At Kids FIRST, we used this funding to hire a second full time medical provider and a bilingual/bicultural forensic interviewer. This investment increased capacity and reduced wait times for urgent assessments; we're now able to assess children within 48 business hours of an urgent referral, with most children being seen same day. The addition of a second medical provider allowed Kids FIRST to DOUBLE the number of medical assessments provided last year, from 194 to 388.**

Most often, Centers receive referrals from law enforcement or ODHS. By providing specialized child abuse expertise, Centers are a necessary resource for ODHS caseworkers and law enforcement officers. Highly specialized medical providers at Centers serve to “rule in” or “rule out” child abuse, and forensic interviewers are trained to ask neutral, non-leading, legally sound, and developmentally appropriate questions.

When children cannot access a Center, the likelihood of misdiagnoses is higher, which can result in children remaining in unsafe situations or children being removed from their homes unnecessarily. When children don’t have access, they may also experience more trauma, due to receiving service in police stations and emergency rooms, rather than a child-friendly setting designed specifically for them.

In recent years, the Legislature has made great strides in improving Oregon’s child welfare system— but we must acknowledge that the success of ODHS caseworkers is not possible without strong community partners providing them with the tools and expertise they need to be successful—including Centers.

We want to hold the progress the Legislature made to protect kids served by Children’s Advocacy Centers and keep much needed new staff in place. This is why we are respectfully requesting \$6M during the 2023 Legislative Session.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah M. Stewart". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Sarah M. Stewart, Executive Director