



April 20, 2023

Dear Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Jackalene Antunes and I am the executive director of Wally's House, the Children's Advocacy Center located in Curry County. I am so grateful you are having the town hall hearings. I know many will be able to have their voices heard. I am unable to attend and lend my voice to theirs, so I am writing today in support of HB 2732, which includes \$6M in funding for the 24 children's advocacy centers located across the state.

Wally's House is the Child Advocacy Center for Curry County. Our county is rural and isolated. If we did not exist the nearest CAC is one and a half to two hours North, and our Regional CAC is 2 and a half to 3 hours the East. For a child to have the services, support and advocacy a Child Advocacy Center provides, it would mean a great inconvenience to the child's family should they have to travel out of the county to get what their child needs. In some cases it might not even happen.

We have only been a stand alone non-profit since July of 2019. Prior to that, our forensic interviewing services were offered in the courthouse basement, and a satellite interview room in one of our police stations; with medical services being scheduled wherever the Public Health's Nurse Practitioner was working in the county. We have been steadily building to what a full service center should be. Karly's Law exams and DHS screenings health, dental and mental health screenings are now conducted at our building in addition to the forensic interviews. Since 2015 we have served, on average, 45 children a year, inhouse.

There are 24 Centers across the state, serving all 36 counties by providing services like medical exams and forensic interviews—as well as prevention services and follow up family services and mental health treatment for children who have concerns of abuse. Centers work in close collaboration with law enforcement, DHS, district attorneys, schools and other community partners during child abuse investigations, both to be cost-effective and because this model has shown improved outcomes for children.

Most often, Centers receive referrals from law enforcement and DHS. By providing specialized child abuse expertise, Centers are a necessary resource for DHS caseworkers and law

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Our Mission: To provide compassionate intervention, assessment, and advocacy for victims and their families, while supporting a child-focused, community-based system of prevention and healing.

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 and developmentally-appropriate questions. While not all children who visit Centers have experienced abuse, or will disclose abuse, Centers are a necessary community resource that must remain accessible. 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.

Children’s Advocacy Centers have been working with the Legislature to increase state funding, and we are extremely grateful that our \$6M funding ask was included in the Christmas tree bill that year. The Christmas Tree bill is just one-time funding, though. Children’s Advocacy Centers continually report that their largest need is staffing. CACs report that they are using the 2021 funding largely to hire new staff or increase hours of 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. Our goal, at Wally’s House, in 2021, when we first requested these funds, was to add a mental health therapist to our staff and offer therapy to our clients as well as provide consistent, reliable therapy for children affected by trauma and received services, and in DHS custody, or in a safe home with their supportive family. With the funding provided in the Christmas Tree Bill we have been able to launch that program! Children that have had to wait weeks and months for assessments and services to address their trauma are now able to have immediate access to those services. We are currently operating that program out of a rented office, offsite. We are now working on a capital campaign to purchase and remodel a neighboring building that will accommodate this program and expand it and have our services onsite, in a campus setting.

We are working on updating our numbers post-2021 funding and post-COVID, but prior to that only about 55% of kids who were referred to Children’s Advocacy Centers were seen, largely due to lack of available staff. When kids can’t be seen at a Center, DHS has to make a placement decision without all of the necessary information and/or a kid is seen by someone who is not specialized, or in a non-trauma informed environment like a police station or emergency room.

We, in Oregon, need to hold the progress the Legislature made to protect children 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. HB 2732, which is in WMS contains this funding, and DOJ also put forward POP 309 which contains that same request.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jackalene J. Antunes
Executive Director