

Submitter: Erik Tallen
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means
Measure: SB5506

For the record my name is Erik Tallen and I work for the Oregon Department of Human Services in Lane County. I have worked here for 1.5 years. I am here today to ask you to invest in the work that my fellow state workers and I do. We risk our lives during wildfires, provide lifelines to families in need, keep our roads safe, care for our most vulnerable, and so much more. Every Oregonian is affected by our work, and we care deeply about the services we provide for the people of Oregon and take pride in our work. We Make Oregon Work.

At ODHS, I am an Office Specialist 2 in the Child Welfare Department as a relative researcher. When a child comes into foster care, I look for their relatives in order to make family connections as well as options for temporary or permanent placement. With my work, I am helping families build connections so children can have a sense of belonging and community. Majority of the groundwork being done is by Case Workers. Case Workers have extremely high caseloads. I've spoken with Child Protective Services workers who said that they would be getting about 8 cases per month but are getting 5 cases per WEEK! I've spoken with Permanency Case Workers who are supposed to have 8-10 children on their caseload but have 18-20 children. Workloads have gotten out of control. How are we, as state workers, able to provide the quality services to Oregonians that they expect to receive in these high workload conditions?

Part of why there are high caseloads is due to recruitment and retention. Wages for State Workers are not keeping up with inflation and the rising cost of living. Many state workers rely on SNAP benefits and other social programs in order to get by. This is unacceptable. The lowest paid State Workers are making the same as fast food workers. Folks who work on the behalf of Oregonians do this work because they want to help others. But the goodness in people's hearts is being taken advantage of by being paid poorly. No State Worker should be struggling to get by.

Every agency in our state is facing these challenges, and until we address them, the state is not going to be able to make progress on key priorities like our foster care system, behavioral health, childcare, housing and more. We need to support the Governor's strategic decision to use all available current resources to invest in key priorities. Oregon's reserves are healthy and strong. The Rainy Day is now! We must invest in our state workers so we can provide the best services to Oregonians!