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Oregon DHS needs to stop playing whack-a-mole with vulnerable children

BY: **RICHARD WEXLER** - JANUARY 21, 2025 5:30 AM

For nearly a decade, Oregon’s approach to child welfare has amounted to a pathetic game of whack-a-mole. The “solution” to one crisis begets another, while everyone ignores the issue at the root of it all: Oregon tears apart families needlessly at a rate well above the national average.

This sick game began in earnest when news accounts exposed horrific abuse at one private agency’s group homes. They also revealed that the Oregon Department of Human Services knew about the abuse and did nothing. That investigation whacked the state into raising standards for foster homes. It wound up warehousing foster children in offices and jails.

So — whack — a child advocacy group brought a lawsuit to prohibit the practice. DHS settled. And children promptly wound up warehoused in hotels. Whack — there was another lawsuit and another settlement.

Then DHS shipped children to [horrible out-of-state institutions](#). That was exposed, so DHS went back to warehousing children in what they called “[repurposed juvenile jails](#).”

Now, the game of whack-a-mole may come full circle: Gov. Tina Kotek and DHS [are backing draft legislation](#) to repeal regulations curbing abuse in group homes and institutions.

The reason for each crisis is a supposed “shortage” of placements. But the shortage is artificial — created by the take-the-child-and-run mentality that has characterized Oregon child welfare for decades.

Although DHS has made some progress in reducing needless foster care, as of 2022, the most recent year for which comparative data are available, Oregon still takes away

children at a rate [more than 20%](#) above the national average, even when rates of child poverty are factored in.

The overwhelming majority of those cases are nothing like the horror stories of children beaten and tortured. Of all the children consigned to the chaos of Oregon foster care in 2022, [52% were put there](#) in cases that did not involve even an allegation of any form of drug abuse. Ninety percent did not involve an allegation of any form of physical abuse. And 97% did not involve an allegation of sexual abuse. In contrast, 57% involved “neglect” which often means [the family was poor](#).

All of this is enforced by a massive system of surveillance. [Nationwide](#) more than one-third of all children and more than half of Black children will be subjected to the trauma of a child abuse investigation before they turn 18. [In Oregon](#), it’s 42% of all children — and an astounding 72% of Black children.

This does enormous harm to the children needlessly investigated and even more harm to those needlessly forced into foster care. In addition to the emotional harm, multiple studies (two of them specific to Oregon) have found [high rates of abuse in foster care](#).

Even that isn’t the worst of it. The deluge of false allegations, trivial cases, poverty cases and needless foster care placements so overwhelms workers that they have no time to investigate any case thoroughly — so they make terrible mistakes in all directions.

All those children needlessly torn from everyone they know and love take places in good family foster homes that should go to the relatively few children in real danger. That’s what causes the so-called “shortage” of placements that Kotek is using as an excuse to loosen regulations about abusing those children.

But what about all those youth with “complex behavioral needs” who supposedly must be institutionalized? [Last year, a U.S. Senate committee report](#) pointed out that the entire “residential treatment” model is a failure. There is nothing an institution can do that can’t be done better and at lower cost [through wraparound programs](#). If the state got the children who don’t need to be in foster homes back into their own homes and provided wraparound services to foster parents, there would be plenty of room in family homes for the children Oregon now institutionalizes.

Doing this requires becoming laser-focused on ameliorating the worst aspects of poverty. Even [small amounts of cash](#) can go a long way toward reducing what child welfare agencies call “neglect.” And [COVID taught us](#) it can even curb serious abuse. In addition, families need a system of high-quality defense counsel, with lawyers and social workers — not to get “bad parents” off but to craft alternatives to the cookie-cutter “service plans” often doled out by agencies like DHS. This approach has been proven to reduce foster care [with no compromise of safety](#).

These are real solutions. Maybe someday Oregon lawmakers will take a whack at it.

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