

Good afternoon, Chair Hartman, Vice Chair Scharf and members of this community

My name is Kota Merrifield, and today I stand before you as three things: 1. A Case Aide for District 5 Child Welfare and Cochair of the Lane County Equity and Inclusion Committee 2. An Enrolled member of the Klamath-Modoc tribe of Oregon and 3. A former foster youth

These three intersectional aspects of my identity, paired with my experience as a Direct Support Professional and education in developmental psychology, have given me a unique perspective on the way we as professionals, and as people, care for and support the communities and children we serve. I believe that under proper advisement and oversight, HB3835 has the potential to improve the current systems we have in place to benefit not only the children and clients we serve, but the individuals and providers serving them as well.

As an ODHS employee I have witnessed a cyclical struggle in finding proper support for out youth who need it most. Current legislative language has created a grey area that has left those who support our youth uncertain of the limits of their ability to intervene with youth in crises. Due to this reality, youth are prevented from accessing OR maintaining supports, such as in-patient residential treatment, robbing them of opportunities to find stability in appropriate and supportive placements. This has resulted in a disproportionate number of youth to enter Temporary Lodging (TL) Child Welfares Temporary, last resort, non-Placement alternative to youth sleeping on office floors or remaining unsheltered when appropriate placement cannot be obtained. Children remain in TL for days, weeks, months, sometimes years. Forcing youth into situations that often lack the capacity and facilities to provide the best support for them. Subsequently allowing them to, deliberately and inadvertently, subject themselves and DHS staff to dangerous situations that have resulted in harm to themselves and/or staff. To an extent that resulted in the death of a child. A tragedy that hit many of us hard, especially those of us who worked closely with Jacob, myself included. Child Welfare employees, such of myself, have gone above and beyond for these youth, devoting not only time and energy, but sacrificing our safety as well. From exposure to communicable diseases, parasites and dangerous substances, to unsafe and threatening environments that have resulted in verbal, sexual, and physical assault.

As a tribal member, I also see the potential benefits this bill has for enhancing the goal behind ICWA legislation. Supporting Oregon's Tribes and Tribal families is something I hold close to my heart. This bill would support tribal youth, youth that statistically face more adversities than non-tribal youth, by allowing them to access care that is culturally centered that is currently unviable to them, whether to be in state, or out of state. The reality is these youth and families have a need, have voiced a need, and current legislation has prevented them from obtaining it. Unfortunately, my people have had the ability to choose stolen from them, amongst other things, since as long as we can remember. Due to the given governmental power dynamics instituted against indigenous peoples will by the Department of Human Services, I believe that returning the freedom of choice, especially under these circumstances, to indigenous communities is a stepping stone to righting the wrongs that have been endured, and can only be recognized as one thing: Justice. I can only imagine what differences this would have made in my own journey of healing and self-discovery had the choice and opportunity been extended to me in my time of need.

As a former foster youth with my own historical adversities, certain aspects of this bill caused alarm. I fully understand the psychological implications of trauma and have prioritized navigating

my work and my life in a trauma informed manner. Everything I do is done with the goal of reducing harm, and trying to be the person I needed when I was younger. The thought of allowing the possibility for more trauma to be inflicted on others made me greatly uncomfortable, but I believe this discomfort has been surpassed by my unrelenting need for positive change, to me that means anything that might have prevented a child I worked with for 3 years from committing suicide. It means supporting my peoples right to freedom and equity. It means protecting the youth I see myself in, as well as protecting the people meant to protect those very same youth.

If you all can recognize not only the potential benefits behind this bill, but the potential risks, and ensure all its components are being actively and consciously facilitated and maintained, then I urge you to show your commitment to our youth, employees, and tribal people by supporting HB3835

Thank you for your time.