

April 5, 2025

Co-Chair Sanchez, Co-Chair Lieber, and the members of the Committee,

I am writing to you today to urge you to help Oregon's children in foster care by supporting **HB 5002** and **HB 3196**.

I am the Executive Director of CASA of Central Oregon, a nonprofit organization that recruits, trains, and supports volunteers who advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the court system in Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson counties. Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are ordinary people who make an extraordinary impact for children in foster care. CASA volunteers work within the courts in collaboration with key agencies, legal counsel, and community resources to ensure that every child in foster care in Central Oregon can transition into a safe and permanent home.

Children who have experienced abuse and neglect from their primary caregivers are perhaps one of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations there is. Most children are placed in foster care for a combination of factors, including abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, parental substance abuse, and parental mental illness. Our region has seen a steady increase in the number of children in foster care since 2020. In 2024, 471 children spent time in foster care in Central Oregon.

In Central Oregon, the CASA is often the only consistent adult presence in a child's life during their time in foster care. A child will experience several different caseworkers and will likely live in several resource homes during their time in care but will have just one CASA. This advocacy is effective; national studies show children paired with a CASA tend to receive more needed services, do better in school and in key mental health markers, are less likely to re-enter the foster care system after their case closes, and report higher levels of hope and optimism than children without a CASA volunteer.

There are two bills that are being considered this year by the legislature that will have a tremendous impact for children in foster care. I ask for your support for both HB 5002 and HB 3196.

HB 5002 is the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) budget. CASA programs in Oregon are a line item in this budget through the Oregon CASA Network (OCN). In the 2023-2025 biennium, CASA programs received \$5.9 million and we are included in this year's DAS budget at \$6.3 million. We are very grateful to be included at that level;

however, even with the increase, programs are looking at needing to cut benefits and staff compromising services to kids, due to increased living costs and inflation. I am asking the committee to **increase CASA funding to \$7 million** so that our program can expand services to kids who do not currently have a CASA.

HB 3196 is designed to backfill the loss of federal VOCA funding to organizations who serve victims of crime. **The loss of VOCA funding would have terrible implications for the children who need an advocate the most.** CASA of Central Oregon is part of the larger system designed to protect children, including the local Child Advocacy Center and domestic violence shelter. CASA of Central Oregon is a member of the Central Oregon MDT (multi-disciplinary team) reviewing allegations of child abuse in our region. The work that our organization's do is complementary to each other, though CASA programs are the only partner who is solely focused on the best interests of children in the foster care system. Backfill funding for VOCA grants enables all our programs to continue serving victims of crime at a high level and ensures that no child is left without the vital services that they need.

Thank you for your time and support. I am grateful for the work that you do on behalf of Oregon's most vulnerable children.

Respectfully,

Heather Dion
Executive Director
CASA of Central Oregon