

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 736

Chair and Members of the House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services,

My name is Tori Algee, founder and executive director of Project Family First, a nonprofit committed to reducing the disproportionate representation of Black children in Oregon's foster care system. Prior to founding Project Family First, I worked directly as a child protective services worker, witnessing firsthand both the strengths and profound weaknesses of our child welfare system.

I strongly support Senate Bill 736, the "Know Your Rights" bill, because transparency and dignity should be the standard, not a privilege, when families engage with child welfare agencies. Transparency and dignity mean clearly informing parents of their rights at the beginning of an investigation and treating them respectfully throughout the process. This bill mandates that parents receive clear, explicit notification of their rights before child abuse investigations begin, which is essential to protecting both children's immediate safety and families' long-term emotional and psychological health.

Currently, Oregon families, particularly Black and Indigenous families, experience a disproportionate number of DHS investigations, not because these communities have higher abuse rates, but due to systemic biases and the frequent misclassification of poverty as neglect. Over 75% of investigations yield no evidence of abuse or neglect, yet these families endure disruption, emotional distress, and loss of trust. Such outcomes undermine the fundamental principles of fairness and due process.

Legal scholar Dorothy Roberts, author of "Torn Apart," aptly highlights the problem, stating that "vague definitions of neglect, unbridled discretion, and lack of training form a dangerous combination in the hands of caseworkers charged with deciding the fate of families." Senate Bill 736 directly addresses these dangers by enhancing procedural safeguards and promoting informed consent.

This bill does not create new rights—it simply ensures that families know the rights they already possess. Awareness is crucial because rights that families do not know about effectively do not exist. The passage of SB 736 represents a meaningful step toward rectifying the imbalance of power between families and child welfare authorities.

I urge you to pass Senate Bill 736 to ensure all Oregon families, particularly those disproportionately targeted due to systemic biases and economic hardship, receive the transparency, fairness, and dignity they deserve.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,

Tori Algee
Founder & Executive Director

Project Family First

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