

Submitter: Benjamin Lima
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Human Services
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1533

I am writing to express my support for the intent of Senate Bill 1533. The proposed enhancements to the Foster Children's Bill of Rights—specifically the protections for sibling contact and the guarantee of legal representation during investigations—are vital steps toward a more humane and trauma-informed child welfare system.

However, I must also voice a critical concern: without a significant investment in staffing levels and competitive wages, the state will be unable to meet the mandates set forth in this bill.

The requirements of SB 1533 are rigorous. Shortening the window for providing rights documentation from 60 days to seven, ensuring transportation for sibling visits, and facilitating unimpeded legal access are all tasks that fall heavily on the shoulders of the Department of Human Services (DHS) workforce.

Currently, our state agency staffing levels are dangerously inadequate. We are asking caseworkers to manage workloads that already exceed safe capacities.

Adding new, time-sensitive mandates to an overstretched system creates a "paper-only" right—a promise to foster children that the state cannot physically fulfill.

Furthermore, we are facing a retention crisis. Turnover within state child welfare positions is growing because Oregon is failing to compete with the salaries and benefits offered by city and county governments. We are losing our most experienced staff to local jurisdictions that recognize the market value of this difficult work.

If the legislature passes SB 1533 without simultaneously addressing the need for additional state employees and stronger, competitive wages, the bill will likely fail in its execution. To truly honor the rights of foster children, the state must first ensure there are enough qualified, fairly compensated professionals to uphold them.

I urge the committee to support SB 1533 while also prioritizing the budgetary increases necessary to stabilize our workforce.