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March 30, 2021

Joint Subcommittee on Human Services  
Oregon State Legislature  
900 Court Street NE  
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Testimony on SB 5529

Co-Chair Lieber, Co-Chair Nosse, and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Chris Coughlin. I am the Advocacy, Policy, and Engagement Director at Our Children Oregon (OCO). OCO's mission is to be a voice and force for the common good for all Oregon children, ensuring all children have the resources and opportunities they need to reach their full potential. OCO is the result of the merger between two historic Oregon non-profits: The Children's Trust Fund of Oregon and Children First for Oregon. We elevate data and lived experience to prioritize children and center communities. We continue to connect a community of 115 advocates, coalitions, and organizations through The Children's Agenda, a legislative agenda championing equitable state legislative policies and shared investments to improving the lives of Oregon's children and their families.

The Child Welfare and Self-Sufficiency budgets are so important to providing the supports that families and children need. As such, it is critical that these budgets not only be maintained at Current Service Levels but also receive additional investments in the 2021-23 budget.

### **Child Welfare**

We urge you to support the child welfare core budget and additional investments in SB 5529. Child Welfare Director Jones Gaston presented a powerful Vision for Transformation to this committee last week - a vision for all children to experience safe, stable, healthy lives and grow up in the care of a loving family and community. Much work must be done to stabilize these support systems, but with the commitment of the Child Welfare Division to work closely with current and former foster youth, Tribes, communities of color, and families, we can make progress.

Critical investments made in the 2019-21 budget need to be maintained. In particular, we encourage the committee to maintain funding for the KEEP program and Treatment Foster Care Oregon.

New investments in SB 5529 that should be funded include:

**HB 2505/POP 115 (2021 Children's Agenda Priority):** Oregon Foster Youth Connection has worked closely with ODHS and the Governor's

## **The Children's Agenda**

*is a broad slate of equitable investments and policy solutions to meet the holistic needs of Oregon children, youth, and their families.*



P.O. Box 14694  
Portland, OR 97293  
503.236.9754

[ourchildrenoregon.org](http://ourchildrenoregon.org)

Child Foster Care Advisory Commission co-chairs on HB 2505 to create an equity committee within the Commission. The funding in SB 5529 (POP 115) is essential to provide the staffing that will support the establishment of the equity committee and for the Commission to function effectively.

We also ask that the Committee consider making a much-needed investment to add **additional staff, including child welfare caseworkers**, to support youth and families. Without enough caseworkers to support our families, children may fall through the cracks.

The Family First Prevention Services Act is a tool to help transform how Oregon approaches child welfare, and it is important that the \$4.6 million investment be made in SB 5529 to begin to build the **Family Preservation and Prevention Program** infrastructure. This will ensure that Child Welfare has the capacity to serve families so that children and youth aren't removed.

Respite care is an important component of the success of foster placements, benefiting both children/youth and foster parents. The \$19.4 million investment to establish an effective **respite care program** will help make this support accessible and impactful.

In addition to investments currently included in SB 5529, the following investments should also be funded in the 2021-23 Child Welfare budget:

- Additional investments in the Independent Living Program as outlined in HB 2340.

### **Self-Sufficiency**

As we think through what an equitable recovery looks like, funding for self-sufficiency programs is essential. We urge you to maintain Current Service Level budgets and include targeted investments to support the most vulnerable Oregonians including:

- Domestic Violence Supports Services: POP 130 included in SB 5529 gives tribes and culturally specific organizations autonomy to administer their programs and enables survivors to decide which supports they need to stay safe and maintain stability.
- Supports for Houseless Youth: Oregon should fund the expanded supports for houseless youth (HB 2544) to help significantly decrease the rate of houselessness experienced by young adults, including former foster youth. It is crucial to maintain awareness of this issue, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic.
- TANF funds: Federal funds through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (\$12.2 million), and funds cut from TANF programs during the 2020 special session (\$14 million) should be allocated through direct payments to families in the program. Participating families have strongly expressed their need for increased financial support during these difficult times and this funding would go a long way in meeting their basic needs.

In the past several years, Oregon has made great strides toward improving our foster care system for youth and families. We hope that this committee will choose to maintain the evidence-based investments made in 2019 and consider additional support for the Oregon Department of Human Services. Child Welfare and Self-Sufficiency services must be

fully and appropriately funded. The programs and services highlighted above will improve the child welfare and self-sufficiency systems but require funding to do so.

I urge you to support the child welfare and self-sufficiency core budgets and provide additional investments in SB 5529.

On behalf of the Our Children Oregon team,

Chis Coughlin, Policy, Advocacy, and Engagement Director

*View the 2021 Children's Agenda at [www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2021-childrens-agenda](http://www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2021-childrens-agenda)*