

The Foster Children's Placement Stability and Accountability Act (SB 282)

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Chair Burdick and members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance of SB 282. My name is Cathy Kaufmann and I am the Policy Director for Children First for Oregon.

Children First is a widely respected nonprofit, nonpartisan child advocacy organization that has been speaking up on behalf of Oregon's children for 15 years. We believe every child in this state has a right to be healthy, safe and secure.

I am here to testify in support of the Foster Children's Placement Stability and Accountability Act. This Act will make a significant difference in the lives of foster children – both in the short and long-term – by promoting proven practices.

For nearly 15 years, Children First has been issuing an Annual Report Card on the Status of Children. We have grown increasingly alarmed by the grade of the Child Safety category, which this year is a "D." We are troubled by both the increasing numbers of children entering the foster care system and the mounting evidence that too many of these children will leave that system worse off than when they entered it. The problem is not with the foster parents, people who choose a life of service, but with a system that provides too little support, too little oversight, and too little attention to proven practice. As Researchers from the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, who spent several months studying Oregon's child welfare system concluded: "Families stay in the system longer, and safety is difficult, if not impossible, to assure."

We believe SB 282 is the right first step toward much needed system improvement and improved child outcomes. The four components of the bill are based on strong evidence and will go a long way to address current system inadequacies.

Doing a better job of promoting placement with relatives whenever it's safe will mean more children have stable placements, and more children will successfully achieve permanency, whether through reunification with parents or through adoption or permanent guardianships.

Doing away with the inexcusable disparity that currently exists between licensed relative foster parents and licensed non-relative foster parents will mean more extended family members will be able to care for children who would otherwise have to live with strangers. There is no good reason for Oregon to be one of the only two states in the nation that allow this disparity to exist.

The importance of stability for all children, but especially children who have been removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect, cannot be overemphasized. Oregon's placement stability rates have decreased for three years in a row. Increasing placement stability has been shown to be the most significant factor in improving mental health outcomes for foster children

Forcing the system to do a better job of promoting contact with parents, siblings and extended family will also result in improved outcomes for foster youth. Frequent visitation with parents has been shown to reduce time in foster care, curtail behavioral problems and increase the likelihood of a return home. Placing siblings together in foster care not only helps maintain family bonds, but further increases placement stability.

A stable home also translates into better school performance, which ultimately dictates employment success. School placement stability is the most important factor in improving educational outcomes for foster children, an area to which Oregon's child welfare system must pay more attention. Requiring DHS to report the number of schools a foster child has had, length of time in each school, and if over age 14, whether the child is on track to graduate on time is essential if we are to make progress in this area.

SB 282 also requires caseworkers to report the number of face-to-face visits with each foster child on his or her caseload. At minimum, safety is something our child protection system ought to be able to guarantee. Research shows that face-to-face contact is the key ingredient to keeping children safe, and that it also works to improve permanency.

SB 282 is the right bill at the right time. The foster care system is in serious need of reform and the well-being of the over 16,000 children who in the foster care system depends upon this reform happening now. We urge lawmakers to support SB 282 because of the costs of rejecting this bill – in terms of the life outcomes of foster youth, their safety while in care, and the increased costs of the services they will need if the system continues to exacerbate problems rather than support healthy outcomes – are too great. Thank you.