

February 24, 2021

Support for HB 2544: Grant funding for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Dear Chair Williams, Vice Chairs Ruiz and Leif, and members of the House Committee on Human Services

I'm writing in **strong support of HB 2544**, which would provide an additional \$2.2 million for existing ODHS grantees who assist Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (known as Runaway and Homeless Youth in the ODHS program), plus \$2.2 million for a host home pilot competitive grant program. While the host home program is new to ODHS funding, it has been in operation with great success in Oregon and in other states.

The passage of \$4.4 million in HB 2544 in addition to the \$2.5 million baseline for this program will mean \$6.9 million next biennium in state dollars, a **tiny investment** in terms of the return on investment over decades to come.

This was a major priority for the House Committee on Human Services and Housing, which I chaired from January 2015 through May 2020. Advocates can describe their long struggle to increase funding for this program, which was always under-funded (according to Casey Family Programs) and yet was cut even further during the 2008-2011 recession – and never restored. Thus, our problem of unaccompanied homeless youth worsening in Oregon:

- Family and child homelessness is up 39% in the tri-county area just in the past three years (not even counting 2020);
- Oregon ranks 49th or 50th in spending for unaccompanied homeless youth;
- We spend over 100 times more on adult homeless programs (and even that is not enough!), and yet the #1 indicator of adult homelessness is YOUTH homelessness;
- Oregon has the 3rd highest rate per capita (depending on the study);
- This vastly impacts our efforts to increase our student success.

Rep. Helt advocated for a strong response from our committee in 2019. Because the proposed solution came in an amendment to SB 1 as opposed to a bill at the start of session, we were not able to pass it in 2019, but the committee's awareness and passion for this issue grew.

After hours and hours of meetings with Rep. Helt, the advocates, ODHS, and myself, we introduced [HB 4039](#) as a committee bill. As those of you who served on that committee know, it was one of our committee's highest priorities. It passed our committee, the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services, and the full Ways and Means Committee with unanimous support – and only died because the session ended prematurely.

Since then, the ecosystem for unaccompanied homeless youth deteriorated even more with the pandemic. Youth who lacked assistance and housing had nowhere to turn, which led to worse outcomes for them – and for the greater community who risked higher exposure to youth who could not isolate at home. Two programs (to my knowledge) went under due to lack of support.

Besides requesting funding, the 2020 bill also required ODHS to conduct a survey of needed services throughout the state. I greatly appreciate ODHS's work to conduct a survey, despite the bill not passing, AND the Emergency Board allocating \$1 million in emergency aid for existing RHY grantees this January on my last Friday in office!

HOWEVER, the Legislature must complete this work. It must invest its resources wisely to create a continuum of care for unaccompanied homeless youth, with a range of residential and service options throughout the entire state. I am grateful for the bipartisan collaboration of the House leadership and the many other legislators who signed on as sponsors.

I urge you to sign on as co-sponsors and actively advocate for this bill in Ways and Means!

Sincerely,



Alissa Keny-Guyer, former State Representative HD 46