



29 January 2023

Chair Dexter, Vice-Chair Gamba, Vice-Chair Helfrich, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the **Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency**, I write in support of House Bill 2454 and 2456, which will provide additional resources for unaccompanied homeless youth in Oregon. My name is Jimmy Jones and I am the Executive Director of MWVCAA, where we serve low-income residents of Marion, Polk and 11 other counties across Oregon. Annually we provide more than \$70 million in services and direct client assistance for housing, homelessness, energy and weatherization, and early learning programs to more than 55,000 Oregonians in poverty, in addition to a range of emergency services that shelter the homeless and serve wildfire victims. I also serve as the Vice President for Legislative Affairs at the **Community Action Partnership of Oregon**, and sit on the Housing Committee of the **Racial Justice Council** and the **House Bill 2100 Task Force on Homelessness and Racial Disparities**.

Our Agency operates **HOME Youth Services**, which provides day sheltering and employment programs to unaccompanied, endangered, and homeless youth in Marion and Polk. As part of that work, we operate **Taylor's House**, which is our region's only overnight shelter for runaway and homeless youth. We have been doing this work for nearly 20 years, using whatever resources we could patch together to pay for these critically needed services. Next year we plan to double our bed count by expanding these services into Monmouth and Independence. In recent years, we have competed for and won additional federal funds here at MWVCAA, including the highly competitive Youth Homeless Demonstration Project grant from Housing and Urban Development, and the Basic Center and Street Outreach competitive awards from the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

As a large agency running many anti-poverty programs, we have the capacity and infrastructure to serve youth who are currently homeless and expand that work as the need grows more acute in the future. This bill, however, will not only make it possible for us to serve more youth here in Marion-Polk. These funds would piggyback onto the only statewide distribution network in Oregon, in a way where the resource can be easily absorbed into systems and communities across the state, to serve more vulnerable and victimized youth than ever before.

The statewide need has grown dramatically, especially since the pandemic. We now have more youth than ever in our shelters, some of whom come to us via contract with the Oregon Department of Human Services. In Oregon, we lack adequate sheltering and housing capacity for street youth, and the many others who are living in unsafe situations. In particular, House Bill 2454 and House Bill 2456 will add \$6.25 million to Oregon's host home provider network, a vital resource for keeping youth safe and off the street. These bills will add \$12.5 million to expand Oregon's youth shelter and support services, including critical funding for shelter operations, outreach, culturally specific services, transitional housing and desperately needed mental health resources. These funds would be added to the OHCS ORE-DAP account, a highly effective program sponsored by Community Action Agencies, which can cover the full geography of Oregon. These bills will enable CAA's and other providers to meet this desperate need before the inevitable coming wave of unsheltered, unaccompanied youth homeless that is sure to strike Oregon in 2023.

Why is this needed now? Oregon ranks first in the nation in youth homelessness. Not fifth, not tenth. First. More than California and Texas. Many of the young people who come through our shelter have been trafficked. Many are victims of family violence. Many have considerable trauma and are often dual diagnosis clients in need of higher levels of care. In addition to these unaccompanied youth, Oregon's housing unstable school age population has grown to 18,358 during the 2021-2022 school year. If those numbers were all in a single city, that city would be almost as large as Pendleton or Dallas, larger than Coos Bay and nearly twice the size of Silverton or Newport.

The pandemic has broken many families, and youth are too often on their own, or living in desperately unstable and unhealthy homes. The Community Action Partnership of Oregon, and MWVCAA, supports the addition of this add-on account to stabilize families with school-age youth. Oregon has the worst-in-the-nation K12 homelessness rate (which will likely grow worse still in 2023). And there is a direct, causal link between youth and adult homelessness. Prioritizing the youth population now without carving into existing funding streams is smart homeless policy, both for now and the future.

Investing these dollars will have downstream results in 2025 and 2030. I have personally assessed more than 1,000 adult homeless clients in Oregon. Many of the high needs, chronically homeless residents of our communities—folks with morbidities in health issues, substance use, and mental health—began their difficult, trying roads with a period of youth homelessness. Investing in this system now will save money down the road, and reduce our homeless population at the source. Despite the historic investments in housing dollars the past few years for adults and families, there remains a great deal of unmet need for our youth. I urge your support of House Bill 2454 and 2456, and quick passage out of the Committee.

We have troubled times ahead. There is a gathering storm on the housing horizon here in Oregon. Inflation, rent burden, exploding rental market costs, family trauma drawn out through the pandemic, and other forces will significantly increase our homeless numbers in Oregon. We have seen the edge of that gathering storm, with a 22.5 percent increase in total homelessness since 2020, and the skyrocketing number of unaccompanied and housing unstable youth in our schools. These external economic forces alone will dramatically increase our need in 2023. For too long we have failed to prioritize our youth. Indeed, it has never been more dangerous to be young and alone on the streets. But what we invest here, and now, will have downstream effects a generation from now, and prevent the exploitation and victimization of youth across Oregon today.

Respectfully,



Jimmy Jones
Executive Director