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Testimony in Support of SB 1539 3 February 2022

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chairs Thomsen and Gelser Blouin, and members of the committee:

I am writing to express Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's support for SB 1539. SB 1539 would provide school districts with critical funding to support students experiencing homelessness. We stand with other advocates in affirming the need for Oregon to expand its commitment to homeless youth.

Working with over 150 congregations, organizations, and interfaith partners, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) strives to envision communities of faith in partnership creating a more peaceful, just, sustainable, and compassionate world. EMO works with and for Oregonians through dialogue, advocacy, and direct service, including Second Home, which connects unaccompanied high school students experiencing homelessness with volunteer host homes to provide stable housing and ongoing support. As leading advocates for unaccompanied homeless youth, we unequivocally proclaim that individuals who experience homelessness must be affirmed and supported by their community, which includes providing youth the resources they need to succeed in school.

Oregon has the highest rate of youth homelessness in the United States.¹ More than 22,000 K-12 Oregonians experienced homelessness in the year prior to the pandemic.² This crisis impacts those on the margins worst: Black youth are nearly three times more likely than white youth to experience homelessness nationwide, and about one-third of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+.³

This housing instability, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, poses a drastic threat to youth's future success. Just 55% of homeless students in Oregon graduate from high school, the lowest graduation rate among all major demographics tracked by the Oregon Department of Education.⁴ Passage of SB 1539 will enable a critical expansion of services for one of Oregon's most vulnerable populations.

SB 1539 is essential to improving the performance of students experiencing homelessness. Increasing access to transportation services and other supports will allow these students to maintain consistent attendance at school and increase academic achievement. The best way to solve the adult homelessness crisis in Oregon is to tackle the youth homelessness crisis. Giving students experiencing homelessness a platform to succeed academically and go on to pursue higher education or a career is the best way to ensure that they are able to find and maintain safe, stable housing throughout their lives.

1 WalletHub; <https://bit.ly/30EbyCr>

2 Oregon Department of Education; <https://bit.ly/3CosqKo>

3 National Network for Youth; <https://bit.ly/3GreIJC>

4 Oregon Department of Education; <https://bit.ly/2ZI5usc>

As people of faith, we avow the inherent dignity of each individual person. SB 1539 represents a chance to stand alongside Oregon's school-aged youth and ensure they are not left behind by our education system. We are all called to work with these impressive young people to create a future where all students are on an equal playing field academically.

We urge passage of SB 1539, and extend our gratitude to the individuals and organizations who helped craft the legislation. We thank you for your work and for your consideration of this essential legislation.

In partnership,

Michael Ciccarello
Public Policy Associate
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon