



Native American Youth and Family Center

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February 20, 2025

Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice Chair Linthicum, and Members of the Senate Committee on Human Services

Re: Senate Bill 911 – Independent Living Program

Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice Chair Linthicum, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. For the record, my name is Elisha Big Back, and I serve as the Foster Care Services Manager at the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) in Portland, Oregon. NAYA is one of the independent living providers in Multnomah County's District 2, and we have held this contract for nearly 20 years – long before my time in this role. I have been with the organization for ten and a half years, witnessing firsthand the impact of these services on the lives of foster youth.

I have witnessed both the highs and lows of working with foster youth in this role and have seen firsthand how vital culturally specific support systems are for their success. I have seen youth come alive with hope as they dream of college, independent living, and stepping into their own power, realizing they have the ability to shape their own futures. I have also walked alongside young people who have endured unimaginable loss, supporting them as they recognize their own resilience – stronger than anyone should ever have to be. No matter their circumstances, we are here for them, whether through direct support or as a lifelong community connection, even after they have aged out of services.

Our organization has adapted to every change in our contract to maintain a strong working relationship with ODHS and continue serving what I believe to be our most vulnerable population – the foster youth in this district and across the state. In my opinion, every child removed from their parents should have access to every available state resource, including ILP services. Unfortunately, that is not the case today, though that is a discussion for another time.

The current fee-for-service model used in this contract is inflexible and does not account for the realities of direct service work, particularly the inevitable challenge of staff turnover. In social work, we would all like to believe staffing disruptions won't happen, but the reality is, they do. At the start of our new contract, we experienced turnover and nearly lost the contract entirely because the fee-for-service model provided no flexibility. We had a full caseload of youth but lacked staff to serve them.

When staff went on extended leave, there were no resources available to support this stand-alone position. I personally stepped in, doing my best to meet with youth to fulfill the contract's minimum requirements and keep the program afloat until we could hire someone new. Despite nearly two decades of experience holding this contract, I did not anticipate how quickly the program was placed at risk, nor how little room there was to navigate unforeseen challenges. We almost lost a critical program that provides an irreplaceable resource for the youth it serves.

There must be greater support for providers who are on the frontlines of this work. These young people are more than numbers on a report – they are our future, and we must ensure they receive the consistent, high-quality, and culturally specific support they deserve.

Thank you,

Elisha Big Back
Foster Care Services Manager