

# Youth, Rights & Justice

ATTORNEYS AT LAW

To: House Committee on Human Services and Housing, 2017 Oregon Legislative Assembly

From: Mark McKechnie, Executive Director

Date: February 9, 2017

RE: Support for HB 2216

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Chair Keny-Guyer and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mark McKechnie, and I am the Executive Director of Youth, Rights & Justice. For nearly 42 years, YRJ has represented children in Oregon's juvenile court system and advocated for policies that support the success and well-being of children and parents involved in the child welfare system.

Sibling relationships can be some of the closest and most enduring relationships in our lives. Ten years ago, YRJ sought and passed legislation (SB 414, 2007) to protect sibling relationships by requiring DHS to make "diligent efforts" to place siblings together in substitute care. It further required the juvenile court to review and make written findings regarding the department's efforts.

We advocated for these policy changes because siblings who are placed together tend to stay in one placement longer, experience fewer moves in foster care and are more likely to return home to a parent.

In 2007, less than half of sibling groups with three or more children in foster care were placed with some or all of their siblings. DHS data from September 2015 shows an improvement. DHS reports that 67.2% of sibling groups are placed together in foster care and another 14.4% are partially together. 18.5% of sibling groups were not placed together at all. Significantly, this means that there were 606 children in care who were separated from every other sibling, and at least 650 more who are separated from at least one sibling. There is clearly still more work to do on behalf of the more than 1,200 children who have been separated from one or more siblings in our foster care system.

HB 2216 requires DHS to establish by rule policies that support the rights of siblings in foster care. HB 2216 re-emphasizes the importance of sibling relationships and addresses the needs, in particular, of children who have siblings who are placed in different substitute care settings in Oregon's foster care system.

Even when it is not possible or may not be in their best interests to be placed together, it is important that contact and communication be preserved between siblings, including contact between children in the foster care system who have siblings in or outside of Oregon's foster care system.

It is also important for adults, such as caseworkers, to inform and relay information about significant events that may have impacted the lives or well-being of their siblings.

Youth, Rights & Justice urges your support of SB 2216.