

# Foster youth lobby for expanded independent living program

**Hillary Borrud** *The Oregonian/OregonLive*

With Oregon's Legislature back in session, hundreds of dark-suited lobbyists are cycling through lawmakers' offices in the Capitol to press for their clients' interests.

The session also draws citizen advocates to the Capitol, and among them are young people who've spent time in Oregon's foster system. For the last decade, members of the advocacy group Oregon Foster Youth Connection have met with lawmakers and governors to lobby for policy changes and program funding.

It's a rare opportunity for political leaders to hear directly from the young people whose lives can be shaped by the state's \$601 million-per-biennium child welfare bureaucracy.

This year, the group's top priority is for lawmakers and Gov. Kate Brown to allocate \$8.5 million to expand the "independent living program."

It helps prepare youth who are aging out of the foster system to live on their own, through things like personal finance classes, help getting their driver's licenses and buying household essentials for a first apartment. In Oregon, youth can transition out of foster care starting at age 16 or remain in the system until they turn 21.

"They were pretty much like my mentors, I would say, when I didn't have a foster parent to go to," Raven Sherrett, 21, of Salem said in an interview this week.

Sherrett said staff with the independent living program helped her with a long list of things, from finding help filing her taxes to budgeting.

Sherrett and other members of Oregon Foster Youth Connection met with the governor and lawmakers including Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, D-Portland, and Rep. Caddy McKeown, D-Coos Bay, at the Capitol in late January. Some have also testified at committee hearings.

Hannah Royal, 22, lives in Corvallis where she attends Oregon State University. She plans to graduate this spring. Royal said in an interview this week that the independent living program helped her by paying for some items she needed to move into her own place, such as household cleaning supplies and kitchen items.

The program staffer who worked with Royal also encouraged her to get involved with Oregon Foster Youth Connection.

"She was really awesome with that," Royal said.

The money to expand the independent living program is already included in the governor's proposed Department of Human Services' budget, House Bill 5026, which is in the midst of multiple public hearings. Senate Bill 745, introduced at the group's request and sponsored by a long list of lawmakers in both parties, would also allocate money to expand the program.

Although the advocacy group is focusing its efforts on expanding the independent living program, it supports several other proposals that lawmakers are considering this year: House Bill 2570, which would allocate \$8.3 million to grow the Court Appointed Special Advocates program, which serves children in the child welfare system, and a new sexual awareness curriculum for youth and foster parenting training. The last two items are included in the Department of Human Services budget bill.

Two other proposals address homelessness: Senate Bill 278, which extends a state rental assistance program to youth who spent time in the foster system, and House Bill 2805, which would create a task force to work on housing and shelter solutions for youth aging out of foster care.

Sherrett said she feels strongly that youth in the foster system need specific education about healthy relationships and how to recognize the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship or someone grooming them for sex trafficking or other types of exploitation. Existing sexual education classes don't cover those topics, she said.

"Unfortunately, they don't talk about the mental aspects of ... an abusive relationship," Sherrett said.

*hborrud@oregonian.com; 503-294-4034*