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Foster care program will protect kids, help keep families together *SB 964 modeled after successful pilot projects in Jackson, Clackamas and Washington Counties*

SALEM – The Senate approved landmark legislation today that will implement a new approach to taking care of children who qualify for child welfare services. Senate Bill 964 requires the Department of Human Services and its county partners to implement Strengthening, Preserving and Reunifying Families (SPRF) programs. These programs provide services and support to help keep families together when appropriate and safe, avoid or limit a child’s placement in foster care, and ensure safety and stability when a child is returned home.

“We have seen tremendous success with this approach to taking care of our kids in Southern Oregon,” said Senator Alan Bates (D-Medford), chief sponsor of the bill. “Through this program, foster care placements have been halved, there is less risk of continued abuse, and a lower risk of children re-entering the child welfare system.”

Oregon currently has two different successful pilot programs that use the SPRF model: the On-Track Program in Jackson County and the Oregon Intercept program in Washington and Clackamas counties. Research there has shown that by developing public and private partnerships and coordinating care for Oregon children, the Jackson County pilot program implemented in 2007 was able to reduce the foster care population in that county by 45 percent.

“This new approach is critical to improving outcomes for these children and families,” said Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson (D-Gresham). “This program will reduce the costs of foster care and help avoid other societal costs down the road. This will help with the strain on our mental health services, alcohol and drug treatment, and the criminal justice system.”

Specifically, SB 964 will facilitate reductions in foster care by requiring the Department of Human Services, the Oregon Health Authority, the Housing and Community Services Department, county and community entities to design and oversee:

- Front-end intervention services including mental health, and alcohol and drug treatment
- Residential treatment in cases where a member of a child’s family enters a treatment facility
- Supervised housing, allowing a child and their family to remain together while participating in family-strengthening activities

- Family-centered day and outpatient treatment services specifically designed for substance-abusing parents
- Facilitation of regular contact between a child and the child's family, if separation has occurred
- Case managers who provide child and family supervision, and assistance with life skills development
- Immediate access to supervised drug-free emergency and short-term housing and access to permanent, drug-free housing with onsite case managers and supportive services
- Family-finding services to identify extended family members who can provide support, resources and alternative placement options
- Services of a court appointed special advocate
- Other services and interventions as programs evolve, research develops and funding becomes available.

“What we are asking stakeholders in the child welfare services to do is work collaboratively to try and keep families together whenever possible,” said Bates. “This bill signals a major cultural shift in how we approach taking care of our at-risk kids. We’ve already seen it work in Jackson, Clackamas, and Washington County. Now it’s time to make it state-wide policy.”

The bill now goes to the House floor for consideration.

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