



Date: February 24, 2010      FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Oregon Legislature Expands Medical Coverage to Individuals Leaving Foster Care**

Advocates for foster children and youth hail the passage of HB 3664-A, a bill that expands medical coverage to former foster youth who age out of Oregon's foster care system and continues coverage to age 21. The Oregon Legislature passed the bill Tuesday with overwhelming bipartisan support. The bill becomes effective upon signature by the Governor and will cover an estimated 400 former foster youth, ages 19-21, starting in May 2010.

Unlike other young adults who are usually provided health insurance by their parents into their early 20s, youth who age out of the foster care system often did not have access to on-going medical coverage. Their legal parent, until they reached adulthood, was the state of Oregon.

Healthcare needs for this group of young adults are particularly acute. In 2005, the Casey Family Foundation study of former foster youth in Oregon and Washington found that former foster youth experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at rates nearly double those of U.S. war veterans, yet their access to mental health care plummets by half when they reach adulthood. Former foster youth experience very high rates of poverty and homelessness, as well.

The bill was supported by child advocacy groups Children First for Oregon and the Juvenile Rights Project, Inc. Pamela Butler, who is the Policy and Outreach Associate for Children First, grew up in Oregon's foster care system and led a group of other former foster youth from the Oregon Foster Youth Connection to garner the support of the Oregon Legislature.

Ms. Butler explained the need to expand coverage to young adults leaving Oregon's foster care system: "Most kids who turn 18 continue to be covered by their parents' health insurance to age 22. When the state is your parent, you lose that kind of support at age 18. Foster youth face a number of barriers when they leave care. Providing medical coverage can help them get a much better start as they enter adulthood."

The Juvenile Rights Project has represented tens of thousands of children and youth in Oregon's foster care system over the last 35 years and has previously championed bills to improve educational opportunities for foster children and to prevent homelessness for youth aging out of foster care.

JRP executive director Mark McKechnie provided testimony during committee hearings in the February special session: "Roughly half of foster children suffer from chronic health conditions such as asthma, visual and auditory problems, or dental decay. It is important that they can continue to receive medical care for these conditions so that they have the ability to pursue education, work and live independently."

The federal Medicaid program allows states to add coverage for former foster youth and provides federal funds for approximately two-thirds of the cost. Oregon will now become the 23rd state to utilize this option for former foster youth.