

Clackamas County refers measure to help abused children

 pamplinmedia.com/mop/157-news/476860-385388-clackamas-county-refers-measure-to-help-abused-children

Sam Stites



November ballot will ask voters whether to fund nearly \$40 million in children's safety services over the next five years

Clackamas County residents will be asked on the November ballot whether or not to approve a property tax levy to help fund services for abused children that help keep them safe and find them permanency in homes.

The county's board of commissioners discussed and gave preliminary approval to the measure at their policy session earlier this week before a public hearing held Thursday, Aug. 13.

After listening to testimony from several leaders of local nonprofit organizations that work with foster youth and abused kids, the board unanimously approved referring the measure to the voters of Clackamas County.

"I think this is probably one of the more momentous things that we will have done as a county commission if this passes," said Commissioner Ken Humberston. "It is always difficult to ask people to raise taxes. However, I spent 50% of my career in law enforcement working with juveniles. And I can tell you that the need far exceeds even what we're going to be able to do with these resources."

If passed, the measure would be effective for five years and tax local property owners 15 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The annual proceeds from the levy are estimated to be \$7.9 million — nearly \$40 million over five years — and will be used to provide services for Clackamas County youth who have in the past or are currently experiencing violence, abuse or neglect. Specific services funded by this will include:

- Forensic analysis, medical assessments, and emergency shelters for victims of child abuse and neglect, sexual assault, violence, trafficking and domestic violence;

- Case management and advocacy, safety planning, trauma recovery services and support groups;

- Mental health, behavioral health, and addiction prevention, intervention, treatment counseling and recovery;

- Legal representation and advocacy, court-based advocacy and support; Parenting support, education and skill building;
- Violence prevention programming to reduce the incidents of violence in the community;
- Culturally responsive and population-specific services

The board Thursday heard from some of the most reputable and prominent organizations in Clackamas County when it comes to family and child services including Robin Christian, executive director of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Clackamas County; Simon Fulford, executive director of Parrott Creek Child and Family Services; Jory Monroe, prevention specialist with Northwest Family Services; Catherine Koch, children's program manager at Clackamas Women's Services; and Clackamas County District Attorney-elect John Wentworth.

"I'd like to thank the commissioners and county staff for diligently working on this very important issue. I think if there's one role government has to play, it's in the area of protecting the safety and welfare of its citizens," Wentworth told the board. "This levy goes to the heart of that issue because it's not just protecting the people who live in Clackamas County, it's protecting services to our most vulnerable populations, which includes abused kids."

Robin Christian pointed out that her organization expects that as kids return to school following the COVID-19 pandemic as the economy slowly reopens, the state will begin to see an increase in the number of cases of abuse because they will again interact with mandatory reporters.

"We know that abuse is happening in isolation. We also know it's not being reported," Christian said. "Research shows that children with a CASA volunteer report significantly higher levels of hope, something in short supply these days. I think we can all agree that hope is something we could all use more of, especially children in foster care."

Catherine Koch told the board that during her 10 years with Clackamas Women's Services she's been able to connect with many children and families affected by domestic and sexual violence and has witnessed first hand the healing that families can undergo when there are resources to support them.

Being able to provide families with safety planning, counseling and mentoring so kids have connection to safe and supportive adults in the community, as well as opportunities for children to access support groups so they know that they're not alone in the violence that they've experienced, is really important for healing to be able to begin," Koch said. "I'm just really grateful for the opportunity to be able to talk with you today and the consideration around the child safety levy."

Commissioners also heard testimony from two local residents who commended the county's interest in looking to put this question of funding children's safety services to the voters.

Both Cole Merkel, a resident of Oak Grove, and Charles Gallia — Carver resident, former Oregon Senate candidate and local health expert — commended the county's interest in putting this question of whether to fund children's safety services to the voters.

"Thank you for considering this absolutely critical measure," Merkel said. "I think the advocates in our county have spoken quite clearly that our kids need us to step up."

Gallia agreed, stating that he is "really glad we're taking comprehensive steps in moving Clackamas County into addressing one of the most seriously neglected areas: the abuse of children.

"As we reemerge from this COVID-19 experience, we're actually reimagining what we're going to be like as a community," Gallia said. "This is one way of making sure that the most important connections are built."

After unanimously approving the referral of the measure to the voters, the commissioners took a moment to discuss each of their own experiences with foster youth and child abuse to give credence to just how important this measure is, as well as to commend the work of the coalition of groups and county staff that brought this to the forefront of the boards discussions.

Commissioner Sonya Fischer stated that she's proud to support this measure and will be working tirelessly until November to spread the word about the importance of this measure and the need for voters to approve it.

"Now that we've referred this measure, let's fight for it," Fischer said. "Let's take this to the voters and say, 'This is important.' Let's put our names, our hearts and souls, and all of our energies behind it because this is what we as leaders are called to do."
