

Foster Children's Sibling Bill of Rights becomes law

Gov. Kate Brown signs the legislation that foster youths brought before lawmakers

BY EMILY GREEN
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On May 17, Gov. Kate Brown signed the Oregon Foster Children's Sibling Bill of Right into law.

Oregon Foster Youth Connection, a youth-led advocacy group composed of current and former foster youth, brought House Bill 2216 before lawmakers because several of its members had experienced painful separations from their siblings while in state custody.

Each regular legislative session, the group brings a bill it believes will improve the lives of Oregon's foster youth to Salem. So far, every bill they've had introduced has passed.

This year's legislation establishes a written document outlining foster children's right to be placed into a foster home with their siblings when it's safe and appropriate. When they cannot be placed together, they will now have the right to maintain contact with their siblings, including their right to transportation to visit their siblings in person. They also have the right to more private and less restrictive communication with siblings, when appropriate.

It also requires that a foster child is notified immediately of a sibling's placement changes or catastrophic events affecting a sibling.

As Street Roots reported in February, this element of the bill was crucial to foster youth Raven Bowman, who was not placed in the same home with her younger brother when he was killed in a car crash in November 2014.

No one thought to notify his siblings, and Bowman's older sister didn't learn of her brother's death until the day before his memorial.

Bowman described the separation between herself and her siblings while in foster care as being like torture.

"I didn't know if they were OK, and it was fear. It grew every single time I couldn't talk to them or didn't know what was going on," she told Street Roots in January. She often couldn't make contact due to

restrictions on phone access and rules against using social media in the home where she was placed.

Bowman helped draft the bill and was in Salem Wednesday morning to witness the governor sign it into law.

"I'm excited for future kids who don't have to go through what I've been through," said Bowman.

"It doesn't feel real right now," she said, adding that since the bill passed Oregon's House and Senate unanimously, it's all she's been able to talk about.

The bill also requires that foster children receive notice of their sibling rights within 60 days of their placement into foster care and after any placement change. They can also request that their attorney advocate for contact and visits with siblings, and if they are denied visits, they must be provided with an explanation.

Additionally, they have the right to be placed with foster parents and under the care of caseworkers who have been trained on the importance of sibling relationships.

Lisa McMahon, the program director at Oregon Foster Youth Connection, said Oregon's Department of Human Services, or DHS, has already begun the process of incorporating foster youth input into sibling importance training.

She said

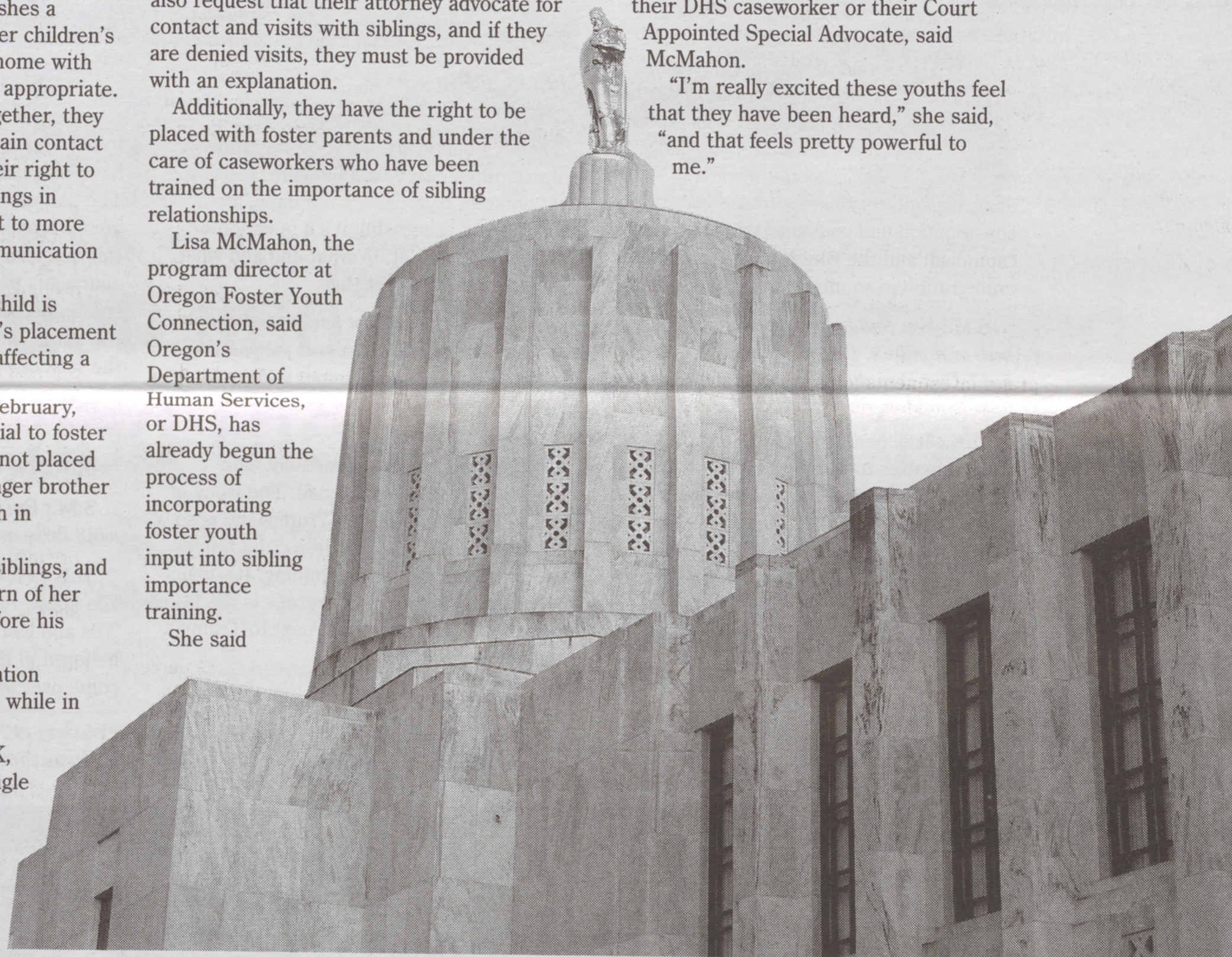
DHS, where Oregon's child welfare system is housed, invited a foster youth to participate in caseworker training and provide their perspective.

McMahon said the next step her organization will focus on is figuring out how to roll out the sibling bill of rights.

This summer, Oregon Foster Youth Connection members will attend a foster youth camp, Camp to Belong, to get additional input from other youths about what they would like to see in the bill.

Once the bill of rights is adopted, when foster children believe their sibling rights have been violated, their recourse will likely be to bring it to the attention of Oregon's Foster Care Ombudsman, their attorney, their DHS caseworker or their Court Appointed Special Advocate, said McMahon.

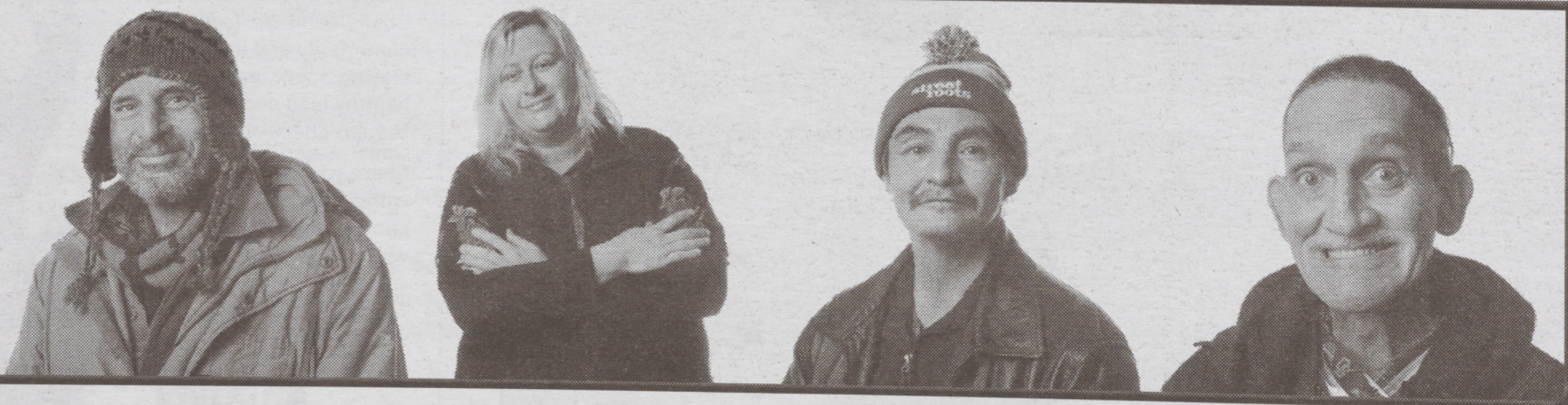
"I'm really excited these youths feel that they have been heard," she said, "and that feels pretty powerful to me."



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