

April 4, 2013

Re: Testimony in Support of HB 3194

Dear Members of the Joint Committee on Public Safety:

Thank you for your service to the people of Oregon and for your willingness to take up the important issue of public safety. My name is Jeff Kerr and I work at Central City Concern in Portland as an addictions and mental health counselor. I am writing on my own behalf as a citizen and voter in this state.

A lot has been said recently about the financial costs of Oregon's prison system and I support the "justice reinvestment" strategy. I think that too much of our state general fund is going to prisons and not enough to addiction, mental health and re-entry services. I think we can reinvestment money in treatment and community-based programs without sacrificing public safety.

However, I would like to ask you to consider more than just money and crime statistics. Our prison system exacts a human toll as well, and I see everyday how broken and damaged many former prisoners are when they come out. Many of them have never been exceptionally healthy and functional to begin with, but I witness so much trauma and so much stress that former inmates carry with them. This "system" that we have created to deal with crime is sad and tragic.

I do believe that prisons are a necessary evil and that we need to protect ourselves from dangerous people. However, we need to think carefully before sending so many people to prison. We need to remember that 95% will be released some day and they will not have a staff to feed them, clothe them and manage them for the rest of their lives. In a fair society, prisons should be rehabilitative. The people who wrote Oregon's original constitution certainly knew this because they stated very clearly, "Laws for the punishment of crime shall be founded on the principles of reformation, and not of vindictive justice" (Oregon Constitution of 1859, Article I, Section 15—modified in 1996).

The tragedy of Oregon's prison system is not so much it's financial cost, it's the way it has become more like a warehouse for society's outcasts, rather than a place where people can become healthier, more employable and less angry and violent. Everyone has a different experience in prison, and some people do use the time to better themselves. But with mandatory minimum sentences, there are no real incentives for self-improvement and it's just a matter of doing your time and paying your "debt" to society. It's a pretty sad system, and I doubt the people who designed it were very interested in rehabilitation. Measure 11 certainly feels like "vindictive justice" to me.

I urge you to consider how the public safety reform proposals in front of you will make Oregon's prison system more humane, more rehabilitative, and better at preparing inmates for release. The issue here is not just about money, it is about human beings, and it is about recognizing that we are all connected to each other whether we like it or not. The people in Oregon's prisons are in fact people, and they should be treated as such. I urge you to move HB3194 forward because I believe it is a step in the right direction. It is small step, but at least it is in the right direction.

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