



TESTIMONY ON HB 5005

Submitted to the Public Safety Subcommittee of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means
By David Rogers, Executive Director, Partnership for Safety and Justice
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Co-Chair Williamson, Co-Chairs Winters and Smith, Members of the Committee,

My name is David Rogers, and I am the Executive Director of the Partnership for Safety and Justice. Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ) is a 14-year old statewide advocacy organization that advocates for smart public safety policy, which to us means working with everyone most impacted: victims and survivors of crime, people convicted of crime, the families of both, and system stakeholders. This gives us a critical and comprehensive perspective on needed changes.

I would like to focus my comments today on five key issues of concern regarding the Department of Corrections (DOC) budget.

The first issue is the need to contain the growth of the prison system and budget. A Legislative Fiscal Office report on corrections spending identifies the DOC budget as one of the fastest growing parts of the budget, almost doubling its percentage of the General Fund and Lottery Funds portions of the state budget since the mid-1980s. This growth is concerning because it has been at the expense of more cost-effective approaches to public safety.

We strongly support the Governor's goal of passing a package of corrections and sentencing reforms that would flatline prison growth over the next decade. Doing so would allow Oregon to invest more resources in the public safety infrastructure better equipped to address crime, accountability, and prevention.

Both the last DOC Director, Max Williams, and the current DOC Director, Colette Peters, have consistently supported the need to address the unsustainable growth of the current prison population trajectory. This requires urgent action.

The second issue is the need to invest more heavily in community corrections. Ninety-three percent of state prisoners eventually return home. We need a strong community corrections infrastructure to manage and supervise that population. Community corrections is a cost-effective and under-utilized approach to accountability, and an approach that successfully utilizes a range of strategies proven to be effective at reducing future crime and recidivism. Many counties direct some of their state funding toward re-entry programs, addiction treatment, and mental health services that break the cycle of crime and reduce recidivism. Counties around the state have had to cut these programs for a lack of resources. Oregon cannot achieve a healthy and effective approach to public safety without providing a more robust level of funding for community corrections programs than currently found in the proposed budget.

The third issue is the need to acknowledge DOC's declining investment in the types of programs that are proven to reduce recidivism. As Oregon's prison population has grown and we have spent an increasing amount of money on building and operating new prisons, we have consistently cut funding for cognitive programs, addiction treatment, and adult basic education. These are the types of programs that actually save the state money because they reduce recidivism and prepare people to succeed when released. We need to strengthen and expand these programs not cut them. The current budget prevents troubling cuts in this area, but we would like to highlight the trend from the past decade in cutting these vital programs.

Fourth, we would like to emphasize that the safety of staff and prisoners is a strong concern. As DOC has struggled to manage an influx of prisoners with limited resources, there is a growing trend of packing people into spaces not developed for the current capacity. Having spoken with DOC staff and representatives, there are legitimate safety concerns about this approach. This situation is likely to get worse, not better, if action is not taken to flatline the population growth. We also strongly support the adequate pay, vacation time, benefits and professional training for correctional staff who work under extremely stressful conditions. Part of maintaining Oregon's low recidivism rate depends on having professional correctional officers.

Fifth, there is a great deal of attention to addressing the rising costs of DOC. In this context, it is important to point out the most effective way to address the rising costs is to stop the growth of the prison population. The Commission on Public Safety has developed a set of recommendations that would do exactly that in ways that are research-driven and would improve Oregon's approach to public safety. We are concerned about any strategies that would try and reduce costs in ways that threaten the professionalism, training, safety, and effectiveness of DOC employees.

Maintaining safe and healthy communities is of the utmost importance. We appreciate your thoughtful approach to considering shifts within the DOC budget and our overall public safety strategy that will help modernize and strengthen our approach by focusing on cost-effective strategies that save money over the long run.

Thank You.