

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 4037
Submitted to the House Judiciary Committee
By Shannon Wight, Deputy Director, Partnership for Safety and Justice
February 6, 2014

Chair Barker and Members of the Committee:

My name is Shannon Wight and I am the Deputy Director at Partnership for Safety and Justice. Partnership for Safety and Justice is a statewide, non-profit membership organization that has worked in Oregon for 15 years. We are unique because we advocate for policies that benefit both people convicted of crime and the victims of crime. We believe we can and should have a public safety system that ensures the people most impacted by crime have opportunities to rebuild their lives. I am here today testifying in support of HB 4037.

HB 4037 simply allows a county sheriff to designate either the Oregon Youth Authority or local juvenile department to transport convicted youth directly to the Oregon Youth Authority. Primarily due to Ballot Measure 11, youth as young as 16 have been housed with adults; HB 4037 would change that, ensuring that they are transported directly to a youth facility.

Two years ago we learned that youth convicted as adults were being processed through the adult prison at Coffee Creek on their way to the Oregon Youth Authority. As is often the case when youth are in adult prisons, these young people were frequently held in isolation cells for 23 hours a day for their own protection during their week of processing. Particularly for youth with mental health conditions, this was a terrifying and damaging experience; solitary confinement is known to aggravate mental health problems.

It should be noted that in recognition of the fact that youth are best served when they do not come into contact with the adult prison system, the Department of Corrections has shortened the amount of time a youth is in their custody for intake. However, any exposure to adults, which will necessarily happen if the DOC is processing the child, poses safety and health concerns.

There are both logistical and legal challenges to changing the practice of doing intake for a state sentence at Hillcrest for boys or Oak Creek for girls. Last session the Legislature unanimously voted in support of HB 3183 which began to address the legal barriers.

This session we are addressing the logistical challenges. HB 4037 allows the local sheriff's office to delegate this transportation responsibility to OYA or a local juvenile department. Local juvenile departments and the Oregon Youth Authority have agreed to transport youth directly to OYA. By accepting the responsibility of transporting youth from the county to the Oregon Youth Authority, the logistical barrier is remedied.

Research tells us that trying youth as adults in the criminal justice system and exposing them to the adult correctional system makes them more likely to commit future crime and puts their health and safety at risk. HB 4037 aligns Oregon with what we know works best for youth.

Partnership for Safety and Justice, the Department of Corrections, the local juvenile department directors, the Oregon Youth Authority and the sheriffs are all in agreement that HB 4037 works well to address the needs of all parties concerned. We are thankful for the commitment to best practices for youth, and the many hours the different agencies spent working to find this solution. We also want to thank Representative Barton for his dedication and sponsorship of the bill.

We ask for your support of HB 4037.