

March 5, 2015

Chair Barker and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Jeremiah Schroeder. I support the passage of House Bill 2806. I am a Corporal at the Oregon State Penitentiary and have worked for the Department of Corrections for almost 10 years. I am currently a Field Training Officer (FTO) and am currently a member of the Penitentiary's Emergency Staff Services (ESS). ESS is a peer-to-peer support team that is directly involved with helping Penitentiary staff in all levels of crises.

Crises in corrections, as with other factions of the criminal justice system, come in multiple forms. They can be job related (riots, assaults, medical emergencies) and personal life related (divorce, domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicides). These are just a small sample of the crises the department's staffs are exposed to and my job as an ESS member is to assist these staff as needed. This can come in the form of informal conversations up to debriefing staff after a major event.

Unfortunately, I have been directly impacted and involved when some of my fellow staff members have had different crises overwhelm them. In the past 5 years there have been multiple suicides by staff members in the Department of Corrections. Unfortunately 5 of them were employees of the Penitentiary and one of them was a son of a Penitentiary officer. The level of stress, as you could imagine, greatly increased. This was on top of the "usual" stressors of our occupation.

Corrections Officers are exposed to an increased level of stress due to the nature of our job. Learning to cope with this stress can be challenging. Asking for help is even more so. It is easy to pretend that things don't bother us or find "private" means to deal with it. Through education and awareness officers have learned healthy ways of dealing with stress. They also have found unhealthy ways of dealing with stress. Self-medication with alcohol and unfortunately other drugs become quick and easy options with negative results.

Corrections Officers, as well as many others employed in the criminal justice system have a hard time asking for help. Most of our careers are spent working on our own in designated areas and we are the focal point for that area. Officers want to show that they can be relied on and try their best to not show any signs of weakness. There is a stigma that if you are having a hard time with personal matters or job stressors that you are weak or can't be counted on. These feelings are real even though with a clear head we know they are false. It just means that we are human. The last thing that should be on an officer's mind is that their job or certification could be on the line if they ask for help.

Mental health professionals are a great tool to help struggling officers get back into the proper mindset that the job dictates. I have seen first-hand the effectiveness they have had on officers and family-members of officers' deal with significant events. I have also seen how much these professionals have helped people before a significant event or crises arose. Helping people before or to avert a significant event is obviously the most preferred.

I believe that passage of House Bill 2806 will be a significant step forward in removing a huge barrier that Corrections Officers see in front of them when they are seeking help. Losing their certification or their job will be one thing they won't have to worry about or use as an excuse to not get help. As a peer-to-peer support team member, it makes this one tool easier to present to an officer in crises. The Department of Corrections and the State of Oregon have already shown their support in terms of employment benefits which include counseling services. Please show your support by passing this bill.

Thank you.

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Oregon State Penitentiary  
Field Training Officer  
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