

March 10, 2015

Dear Chair Rosenbaum and members of the Senate Rules Committee:

I am writing in support of **SB 331**.

In 2011 I participated in a year-long City Club of Portland study that looked at the redistricting process in Oregon. One recommendation in the City Club report states that, "For purposes of redistricting, inmates of prisons and jails in Oregon should be counted in the district in which they last resided before incarceration." Senate Bill 331 would do just this.

In studying the redistricting process we learned the importance of fair and proportional representation, or the principle of "one person, one vote," as well as the importance of recognizing the integrity of communities of interest when drawing the lines in Oregon. Our current practice of counting prisoners in the districts where they are incarcerated rather than where they formerly resided violates these principles.

Counting prisoners where they are incarcerated creates a distortion of representation in communities with significant prison populations. Because prisoners cannot vote, the votes of residents in these districts have more weight than those in districts with no prison population. I don't believe that this distortion is intentional; it is just a factor of how the census has traditionally been carried out. However, in certain Oregon districts, this distortion is real, such as District 60 in Eastern Oregon where 5% of the population is inmates. It also appears in the Salem area and in Pendleton.

Counting prisoners in the district where they last resided makes it far more likely that they will be part of a community of interest that best represents them. Very few prisoners actually remain in their place of incarceration after release. In fact, by state law (ORS 144.270 (6)(a)), they will be returned to their county of residence before incarceration. The separation from their community of interest can be particularly true for prisoners belonging to racial or other minorities. For example, Native Americans make up about one percent population of Oregon yet they are three percent of the prison population. They are likely to be incarcerated far from their homes. This can have the effect of diluting the power and voice of their home community.

SB 331 asks the state of Oregon to join states like New York and Maryland in doing what ultimately the U.S. Census bureau should do when counting those who are incarcerated. The City Club of Portland has joined with Oregon Common Cause, the League of Women Voters of Oregon, AARP, and many other Oregonians in endorsing SB 331. It is a practical and fair approach that will allow us to better honor the principle of "one person, one vote" as well as the integrity of communities of interest.

Carl von Rohr
Portland, Oregon