



March 19, 2015

Co-Chairs Rep Williamson and Sen Shields and Members of the Committee,

RE: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 5504 (Department of Corrections Budget)

My name is Jeffrey Hernandez. I am a Sergeant at the Oregon State Penitentiary and have worked for the Department of Corrections for over ten years in three different institutions, including all security levels. I was also a part-time Corrections instructor at DPSST for four years and, prior to my employment, studied criminal justice and human/gender studies at Portland State University and New York University. I have also been a member of the Corrections Policy Committee with DPSST for over one year.

Over the past years, due to the economic needs of the State of Oregon, the Department of Corrections has engaged in programs and policies to reduce waste and limit costs. Part of this was in the form of furloughs and pay freezes for line staff, as well as hiring freezes. DOC staff at all levels were asked to do more, with fewer resources. And we did it; from the Director down to the most recently hired correctional officer, the Department of Corrections stepped up and did their part to provide one of the finest, most comprehensive system of prisons that addressed inmate programming needs, gave us one of the lowest recidivism rates in the country, and did its best to address staff health and safety needs. Now we are looking to have some of this work and stress burden lifted off of our shoulders.

Allocating valuable monies to the operations of the Department of Corrections would allow for more staff members to be hired. As we in Corrections face a greater population of mentally ill inmates, having more staff members allows us to provide greater one-on-one interaction with high-needs inmates. We are able to provide more programs, pay more attention, and be more actively involved in their treatment. In short, we provide a better service to our clients, the adults in custody.

The Department of Corrections has been staffed with a high inmate to staff ratio, sometimes at the risk of the safety and health of the staff members. Other times, due to the lack of staff coverage, inmates have not been able to receive the protection that they are entitled to, because human eyes can't be everywhere all at once. We do our best with cameras, random patrols, observation points, and other skills and tactics, but nothing beats having another person there to cover a blind spot.

There are staff safety concerns as well. Health and wellness are important tenets in the Department of Corrections, and I know the Director takes a personal interest in doing more to make for a healthier, safer work force. More staff available in an institution lessens the risk of assault on staff, reducing injuries and ongoing medical treatment. When there are more people available to work, who are trained and ready to go, staff are able to request single days off to attend important family functions or engage with people outside of work, things that reduce stress, increase health, and create a more balanced employee.

There are unseen budget advantages as well. With a greater staff pool, mandatory overtime shifts are reduced, which lowers stress levels in our employees. Sick time misuse goes down, because staff are available to cover open posts and provide needed vacation relief. With more time available for staff to utilize their accrued vacation leave, stress and anxiety goes down, which can translate into saved medical costs, or use of sick leave in the future.

Finally, more positions available means more career opportunities for Oregonians, particularly our military veterans. We provide stable, secure employment, with opportunities for training and advancement in many different areas of expertise. And we provide a living salary for people who are providers for their families.

The safety, healthy, and happiness opportunities are there. We just need the chance to achieve them.

Thank you for your time,

Sgt. Jeffrey Hernandez

Association of Oregon Corrections Employees