

ECUMENICAL MINISTRIES *of* OREGON

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April 7, 2015

Sen. Sara Gelser
Sen. Alan Olsen
Sen. Michael Dembrow
Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson
Sen. Jeff Kruse

Re: SB 739

Dear Chair Gelser, Vice-Chair Olsen and Members of the Committee:

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) is a statewide association of religious denominations, congregations and community-based ministries representing thousands of Oregonians in every rural and urban community throughout the state of Oregon. Our support for SB 739 emanates from our commitment to the human rights of all people, the dignity of every human being and our concern for the most vulnerable in society, including those incarcerated.

Prisons reflect the societies that create them. EMO supports SB 739 because foundational to our core values is a belief in humane prison conditions and treatment of prisoners. The deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill has left many who should be in treatment centers on the streets and subsequently arrested. As a result, the U.S. corrections system is recognized as the nation's largest provider of mental health services. The Oregon Department of Corrections has determined that approximately 70 percent of Oregon's prison population has been diagnosed with at least some degree of mental illness. Unfortunately, our prisons are not therapeutic environments, and the mentally ill do not receive the services they need.

Individuals with serious mental illnesses in Oregon are regularly held in solitary confinement in the Behavioral Health Unit at the Oregon State Penitentiary. For individuals with serious mental illness, studies have shown that solitary confinement is particularly detrimental. The resulting desperation and exacerbation of symptoms can significantly decrease a person's ability to conform his actions to the rules, thus creating a cycle of lashing out and increasing penalties that are devastating for prisoners and dangerous for prison personnel.

SB 739 will put Oregon at the forefront of a wave of nationwide legislation by limiting this inhumane form of confinement for prisoners with serious mental illnesses. The bill also mandates that prisoners with such diagnoses receive structured therapeutic activities, unstructured activities, and limits in the use of force to situations in which such actions are necessary to prevent serious physical injury.

With access to mental health treatment, structured programming, and basic necessities such as exercise, fresh air, and human contact, prisoners with serious mental illnesses can begin the journey towards reentry into our communities with the tools they need to safely and positively engage with others. We believe that our society should stop treating mental illness as "criminal" behavior, and start using health-care responses rather than punitive responses to behavior that results from mental illness. SB 739 will begin to change our treatment of the mentally ill in prisons to practices that are more humane and, ultimately, restorative. We urge your support.

Respectfully,
Jan Elfers
Public Policy Director
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon