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TESTIMONY for Senate Bill 939
Submitted to the Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood
By Andy Ko, Executive Director, Partnership for Safety and Justice
April 7, 2015

To: The Honorable Chair Sara Gelser, Vice-Chair Olsen
Members of the Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood

My name is Andy Ko and I am Executive Director at Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ). PSJ is a statewide nonprofit organization that has been working to improve public safety and criminal justice policy in Oregon for more than 15 years. We advocate for smart on crime policies that address the needs of all people affected by crime and society's response to crime. We believe that effective policy must include an appropriate level of accountability from people who commit crimes, ensure that crime survivors can access the services they need, and invest in proven strategies that prevent crime.

SB 939 is a program intended to strengthen parent child relationships and help some of Oregon's most vulnerable children succeed. In 2002, 20,000 children in Oregon had a parent in prison. We know from research and experience that children with incarcerated parents face a number of hardships, including household instability, poverty, and the sense of loss and confusion that accompanies separation from one's parent.

In addition to causing greater instability for families, parental incarceration causes children to experience extreme uncertainty and a range of emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges. These often manifest as more serious problems later in life, including delinquency, mental illness, and addiction—all of which can contribute to an intergenerational cycle of justice system involvement. The research tells us that maintaining contact between children and their incarcerated parents is one of the most effective ways to improve the children's emotional wellbeing and reduce problematic behavior. Strengthening family relationships also greatly benefits justice-involved parents. Incarcerated adults with close family ties are more successful in the community post-release and less likely to commit additional crimes.

Women represent our fastest-growing inmate population, which has put Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon's only correctional institution for women, in a state of crisis. With Coffee Creek already operating over its intended capacity, the Department of Corrections is dangerously close to opening an additional prison. Most of the women at Coffee Creek are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, and 75 percent have children. In addition to looking at programs like those supported in SB 939, we should not overlook the opportunity to divert some of these women from prison.

Partnership for Safety and Justice thanks you for your consideration of SB 939 and its focus on successful outcomes for children and their parents.