

Testimony in Support of HB 2355

**Submitted to the House Committee on Judiciary,
by Andrew Ko, Executive Director, Partnership for Safety and Justice
March 6, 2017**

To: The Honorable Jeff Barker, Chair
The Honorable Andy Olson, Vice-Chair and
The Honorable Jennifer Williamson, Vice-Chair
Members of the House Committee on Judiciary

Partnership of Safety and Justice (PSJ) urges your support for HB 2355. PSJ is a nonprofit organization that has advocated for public safety and criminal justice policies in Oregon since 1999. We advance solutions to crime that ensure justice, equity, accountability, and healing. We do this by advocating for proven strategies that achieve safe and strong communities, prevent crime, and provide opportunities for both victims and people who commit crimes to rebuild their lives.

We believe in a criminal justice system that works for everyone, and HB 2355 takes Oregon one step closer to achieving that goal. Analysis of race-related bias in our state's criminal justice system consistently shows that people of color are disproportionately represented in arrests, charges, convictions, and sentencing, despite the fact that white people commit the same crimes at roughly equivalent rates.

Implicit bias is exhibited by most people, if not all of us. It affects our workplaces, institutions, and daily lives. So, it is not surprising that the people who make up our law enforcement and criminal justice systems, like the rest of us, are susceptible to implicit bias. However, the impact of implicit bias in the operation of the criminal justice system has a far greater negative impact on individual lives and community wellbeing than in almost any other system. The arrest, prosecution and imprisonment of individuals disproportionately based on their race or ethnicity is a great injustice of our society and an ongoing threat to strong families and healthy communities.

To achieve fairness and equity in the criminal justice system that is consistent with Oregon's values, we need to ensure that our communities are safer and stronger and not unintentionally harmed by systemic patterns of bias. We believe that HB 2355 will help law enforcement to be more successful in ensuring both equal justice and safety for all Oregonians.

HB 2355 also addresses the socially damaging consequences of profiling and disparities in convictions by reducing the charges for certain forms of drug possession from a felony to a misdemeanor. Most of us know someone who has battled addiction, so we know that it's a disorder that rarely presents an immediate path to recovery, but instead requires meaningful and sometimes repeated access to services and treatment.

In many cases, by felonizing drug possession, we felonized a health disorder. Doing so raised profound and permanent barriers to future employment, housing, forms of assistance for needy individuals and their families, and even to community-based opportunities to seek addiction counseling and treatment. While Oregon restores the right to vote to former inmates, that basic civil right still can be lost by people with a felony conviction who leave Oregon for work or any other reason. Felonization of drug possession has forced people with addictions farther to the margins of society and made recovery from addiction even harder to sustain.

The shift proposed by HB 2355 brings us closer to treating addiction appropriately as the health condition that it is. By providing a path for people to heal without foreclosing future opportunities for success in their lives, this bill would help move Oregon to a more effective response to addiction, while also disrupting cycles of incarceration and recidivism.

PSJ respectfully requests that you support HB 2355 and take this important step toward achieving safer and stronger communities by reducing racial disparities in Oregon's criminal justice system and paving the way for a less damaging and more effective response to the challenges faced by Oregonians suffering from addiction.