

March 14, 2017

The Honorable Floyd Prozanski, Chair
The Honorable Kim Thatcher, Vice Chair
Senate Judiciary Committee Members

RE: Senate Bill 692

Dear Chair Prozanski and Members,

On behalf of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, I respectfully request your support for SB 692. The Oregon Justice Resource Center strongly supports SB 692, which funds a pre-entry pilot program to reduce the barriers people face as they transition out of prison or jail back into the community by helping them get their affairs in order before serving their sentence of incarceration.

The Oregon Justice Resource Center is a public interest law firm that represents currently and formerly incarcerated Oregonians and advocates for criminal justice reform. We operate and administer several distinct projects that provide direct legal representation to Oregonians who would otherwise not have access to legal services. We assist on a range of issues – from reducing barriers to reentry to wrongful convictions.

I have the privilege of directing the OJRC's Women in Prison Project and Reentry Law Project. I provide civil legal services to people rejoining the community after incarceration who are clients of Mercy Corps NW Reentry Transition Center and to Native women in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF). The work with the Native women is a continuation of work I did in a legal fellowship with Red Lodge Transition Services to reduce barriers to reentry and improve reentry planning for Native women incarcerated in CCCF. Through this work, I see the wide range of issues that individuals must navigate and deal with after incarceration to have the chance at a stable and productive life in the community. Some reentry challenges can be mitigated by assistance prior to incarceration, like that proposed by the pre-entry pilot program.

A Few Examples

Student Loans: Some of my incarcerated clients had plans to enroll in community college or trade schools after release from CCCF. They saw higher education as a critical part of creating better lives for themselves and their families. A few of the women had previously attended some higher education and defaulted on their student loans, making them ineligible for financial aid immediately after prison. Pre-entry assistance with student loans can help defendants avoid defaulting on student loans while incarcerated or provide defendants with a plan to rehabilitate their student loans before release, leaving open the opportunity for higher education and better entry into the community after prison.

Holds/Detainers: Some of my incarcerated clients had “detainers” or “holds” on them for various reasons, including unresolved business in other court cases. Someone with a detainer is ineligible for certain prison programs, such as short-term transitional leave and Alternative Incarceration Programs (AIP). The Department of Corrections offers two types of AIP, an intensive cognitive program and an intensive drug treatment program. Participation in AIP can have a variety of effects on a person’s reentry plans. Many individuals need and want cognitive or addiction treatment programs to address root causes of their criminal behavior and to help prevent future criminal activity. In addition to the benefit of new coping skills and life skills, individuals can also use the completion of such intensive programs as evidence of their rehabilitation efforts when advocating with landlords or with the courts for parenting time with their minor children. Pre-entry assistance to resolve detainers can significantly impact the way an individual serves her time in prison and the opportunities that are available to her when she is released.

Financial Accounts: A few of my incarcerated clients were concerned that ex-boyfriends were using their credit cards, withdrawing money from their bank accounts, and opening credit cards in their names because the ex-boyfriends had access to their ID, social security number, credit/debit cards, and other personal information. Pre-entry assistance to close accounts or put finances in order can protect defendants from being victims of identity theft, losing resources, and having to deal with these difficult issues upon reentry.

Based on my experience working with justice-involved individuals I have seen a great need for increased access to services on civil matters to help prepare for life during and after incarceration. A small up-front investment in pre-entry services has the potential for significant benefits later such as expanding opportunities for education and addiction treatment, strengthening family connections, and decreasing the likelihood of identity theft.

The Oregon Justice Resource Center believes the pre-entry pilot program is a first step in acknowledging that most individuals who are justice involved and sentenced to a period of incarceration will return to our community. Treating defendants holistically will lead to greater stability and an increased chance of success while incarcerated and after incarceration.

We urge you to support SB 692.

Sincerely,

Julia Yoshimoto
Attorney and Project Director
Reentry Law Project and Women in Prison Project
Oregon Justice Resource Center