



May 28, 2020

To: Chair Bynum, House Judiciary Committee

Chairwoman Bynum,

As the nation's largest bipartisan criminal justice reform organization, we ask you to consider the immediate needs among the most vulnerable among us during the COVID-19 pandemic: the incarcerated men, women, and youth in the state's correctional facilities, the officers who work in these facilities, and the surrounding communities. We also ask for you to support an inclusive approach to reopening Oregon and providing economic opportunity to those same vulnerable residents through the elimination of the collateral consequences of failure to pay fines and fees.

Many people being held in prisons across the state are elderly, ill, or otherwise immunocompromised. In Oregon prisons, 8% of the population is over the age of 61, accounting for 1,119 inmates. Not only are they at greater risk of infection, they may be more likely to pass on the infection to other incarcerated people, corrections officers, law enforcement, and medical staff, who may in turn spread coronavirus to their families and communities—making us all less safe. While Governor Brown has yet to order any releases of Adults in Custody (AIC), we ask that you consider creating legislative pathways for release in any future special session and in the 2021 regular session. We know that this pandemic is far from over and paths to release non-violent individuals must be created to safeguard the safety of inmates, correctional officers, and all Oregonians.

In addition, Oregon is currently suspending driver's licenses for failure to pay court fines and fees. Over the past several years, several states, from Mississippi to California, have passed legislation to stop the practice of criminalizing poverty while still being able to suspend licenses for public safety reasons. License suspension is a significant restriction and should be employed when a driver poses a driving-related threat or issues, not when they are merely unable to pay a fine or a fee. While the Oregon Judicial Department put a moratorium on suspensions during COVID-19, this only impacts state courts not municipal, county, and justice courts where many suspensions are continuing. We urge you to support the end of driver's license suspensions for failure to pay permanently – in both state and local courts. As Oregon recovers from the economic fallout of COVID-19 pandemic, legal access to a car is critical for both employers and employees.

Taken together, these steps can keep our communities safe while lessening the economic impact of COVID-19 on incarcerated people and the state at large. Now is the time to take concrete steps toward mitigating the spread of this disease in prisons and jails before the state's healthcare system is overwhelmed and reduce the impact of the justice system on Oregonians ability to rebuild their jobs and support their families. We are eager to work with you and your colleagues and to serve as a resource throughout this process.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Holly Harris, Executive Director  
Justice Action Network

Cc: Vice-Chair Power, Vice-Chair Sprenger, Representative Barker, Representative Spence, Representative Lewis, Representative Moore-Green, Representative Noble, Representative Piluso, Representative Sanchez