

February 18, 2019

The Honorable Jennifer Williamson, Chair
The Honorable Chris Gorsek, Vice-Chair
The Honorable Sherrie Sprenger, Vice-Chair
House Judiciary Committee Members

Re: House Bill 2631 - Support

Dear Chair Williamson and Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to write in support of HB 2631. I support this bill because I have professional and lived experiences with incarceration and with the reentry process and I know how important civil legal services are for people in prison, particularly for women at Coffee Creek who will soon be released. I have personal experience returning to the community following incarceration and I also work as a Reentry Navigator; there are few legal resources available to people in Portland, the largest urban area in the state, and virtually none outside of the metro area and especially few tailored toward women.

In November, 2008, I was released from CCCF following twenty-two months of incarceration. I paroled to Lane County; it was the Friday before Thanksgiving and I was expected to find a job within thirty days. The following Monday I started working at Wendy's. It was only four miles away from Sponsors, where I was living, but there was only one bus route to get me there and it stopped running at 11 pm on weekdays and 10 pm on Sundays. I also did not have a birth certificate or state ID. I had a driver's license prior to my incarceration, but I paroled with just the release card issued to me by DOC.

I have three (now grown) children. My youngest, my son was seven when I was released and I had a complicated custody situation as a result of my incarceration. I tried to address it by mail and through my DOC counselor, but I left the facility with little understanding of my rights as a parent upon my release and no resolve of his custody. It was the holiday season; I was working full time, walking home alone past midnight during my first weeks out, with no ID. There was only an over-crowded Legal Aid office that I did not know how to navigate and it was not equipped to handle issues during reentry. Having the opportunity to talk to an attorney prior to my release would have made an already difficult time considerably easier.

In 2014, I graduated from Portland State University with two bachelor's degrees and in 2018 I earned a master of social work degree. I have worked with thousands of people as they re-enter the community following incarceration. As a Reentry Navigator, I generally see people shortly after their release from prison or jail. Having experienced many of the same problems myself, I recognize the importance of legal services for issues related to licensing (driver's and

professional), family law (divorce, child custody) and all types of debt. I am able to help my clients with many resources in the community, but legal services are rarely free and even low-cost (which is also hard to come by) is impossible for most people in reentry.

Legal services are critical to people who are about to reenter the community. Having a successful reentry process only helps make people good neighbors and helps people to fully participate in society. There are many barriers to successful reentry; finding a livable wage job finding affordable housing, addressing health care and for women, many of whom are mothers, the barriers increase. The ability to address the most complex of these issues by meeting with an attorney prior to release should be supported.

Please support HB 2631 and invest in reentry services for women by providing civil legal assistance to the women at Coffee Creek. I know how much it would have helped me, I see how much it can help the women I work with and I believe that providing legal services to women prior to release will contribute to healthy communities that we all share.

Sincerely,

Ailene Farkac, MSW
Reentry Navigator