

Testimony in support of LC 97/HB 4210
Submitted by Paul Solomon, Executive Director
June 23, 2020

Chairs Courtney, Kotek, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Paul Solomon and I am the Executive Director at Sponsors, Inc., based in Eugene. I am also the Chair of Lane County's Local Public Safety Coordinating Council (LPSCC); I serve on the Governor's Reentry Council and the Work Group on Reentry, Employment and Housing (where this bill originated), in addition to many other boards related to public safety. This is a letter in support of LC 97/HB 4210.

Sponsors, Inc. is a national leader in the delivery of Reentry services. We operate 20 buildings on seven sites in Lane County, where we provide more than 240 units of housing and ancillary programs for individuals with criminal histories. In 2019, we provided financial support to more than 600 individuals with conviction histories to acquire Oregon ID and driver's licenses. ***The vast majority of people reentering the community post-incarceration have lost their driving privileges.*** Anecdotally, I would estimate that roughly half have lost their licenses non-criminal offenses – everyday infractions that have stacked up against them because they can't pay the fines. Failure to pay on a single traffic fine can result in up to a 20-year license suspension. *Our class-based system unfairly punishes the poor and contributes to spiraling debt that is often a fraction of the original fine or assessment.*

Over 30 years ago, I had two unpaid tickets for driving infractions, which resulted in a license suspension. At the time, I didn't have the money to pay the tickets and had to make the difficult choice of driving or losing my job. This resulted in two separate driving while suspended convictions. While I accept responsibility for my actions, the resulting consequences created a major barrier when I was released from prison. It directly impacted my ability to find gainful employment until I paid what had become a significant debt. All of this because I did not have the available resources to pay two \$75 tickets.

As an organization, we advocate for our participants to take responsibility for their past financial debts and help them to work out payment plans. However, it is not uncommon to see people with thousands of dollars in debt that has accrued interest at an alarming pace during their incarceration. The daunting sums often include child support arrears, medical debt, court fines and fees, outstanding rental and utility bills, and credit card debt, on top of traffic fines and fees. When our clients do find gainful employment, the average wage is \$12 an hour. It is not unusual to have half of their income dedicated to paying off debt, leaving \$5 - \$6 an hour to pay for housing and basic needs. Meanwhile, they are lucky if they can access public transportation that gets them to and from work. In many parts of Oregon public transportation is simply not an option.

Now more than ever, we need to do everything we can to remove barriers to economic stability for low-income individuals. With staggering unemployment rates, people are struggling; one unpaid ticket could be the start of decades of economic struggles for a family. Debt-based license suspension is bad public policy. We must not allow our current economic and public health crisis to create lasting barriers that keep people in poverty. The inability to pay a traffic fine should not deprive a person the ability to lawfully drive to the hospital, doctor's appointments, or their job.

Please join me in supporting LC 97/HB 4210, a common-sense approach that stops punishing Oregonians for being poor and reduces barriers to reentry.

Sincerely,



Paul Solomon
Executive Director