

February 9, 2021

Senate Judiciary Committee  
900 Court St. NE-HR  
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 566-Removes the label of “mentally defective” around Oregon’s framework for capacity to consent to sexual contact.

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of the Committee, my name is Morrigan Hunter and I am a social work student at Portland State University. My field of focus is on preventing violence against individuals with disabilities and I am myself a survivor of sexual violence who experiences disability. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 566.

Labelling individuals with disabilities as “mentally defective” does not protect them from abuse. It does, however, perpetuate stigma and infantilization that prevents individuals with disabilities from receiving adequate sexual health education.

As a survivor myself, as well as in my community organizing, I have seen how stereotypes of individuals with disabilities as being childlike and incapable of pursuing sexual relationships actively contribute toward the abuse this population experiences. For instance, being considered “mentally defective” sometimes means that individuals are subjected to compliance training which may put them more at risk for experiencing abuse. In order to prevent sexual violence against individuals experiencing disability it is essential that they learn important skills for self advocacy and consent rather than compliance. This requires the removal of out-dated and stigmatizing language such as “mentally defective.”

As a survivor who experiences disability I also know that perpetrators often take advantage of the stigma surrounding individuals with disabilities as being “defective,” by telling them that no one else would want a relationship with them. This can make it much harder for individuals with disabilities to freely

advocate for themselves if they fear that no one else would want a relationship with them. Perpetrators also use the language of “mentally defective” to prevent survivors with disabilities from getting help, by claiming that their accounts of abuse are not credible.

By recognizing the importance of teaching consent and respecting the rights of individuals with disabilities to engage in consensual sexual expression, we can make meaningful progress toward ensuring that individuals with disabilities live fulfilling lives that are free of sexual violence.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions that you have.

Best,

Morrigan Hunter  
MSW Candidate  
Portland State University