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Written Testimony Supporting SB234 and SB713

Good afternoon, Chair Leon and other house members. I acknowledge and appreciate your dedication to serving the people of Oregon. My name is Shawn Sorensen and I am currently living in Ashland in Jackson County. I am a formerly incarcerated scholar currently pursuing my Master's of Social Work Degree at Portland State University. I am also a Counselor working at an opiate treatment center in Medford, OR. I am passionate about serving people who struggle to overcome numerous personal and societal barriers due to the detrimental impact that drugs and alcohol holds on our communities and members of our families. I am very excited to be here today to advocate for this committee to support and push for both SB713 and SB234 to continue to remove barriers for individuals living with criminal backgrounds seeking pathways to higher education and attainment of economic prosperity either while incarcerated or upon re-entry. I have already submitted both verbal and written testimony on record for my support of SB713, my testimony today is to address SB234.

We need change, specifically change in our perspectives on the way we approach criminal justice reform and rehabilitation. With the recent reinstatement of the Pell Grant for incarcerated education-seeking students, the Federal Government has once again opened the gate to promote education as a viable pathway for those willing to challenge themselves to see beyond the walls, the guards, and their cells. As someone who continues to face scrutiny and barriers to opportunities as the result of several drug-related and property crime offenses, it is imperative that educational programs are the held to be the foundational mainstay of carceral rehabilitative interventions.

For so many people impacted by the "War on Drugs" and "Law and Order Politics" that include myself, it is clearly evident that these prevailing hegemonic ideologies primary purpose serves to disenfranchise many families and the communities in which they live in. While we are talking about people who may have engage in deviance, we are also talking about the children, brothers, and sisters of the State of Oregon. It is my hope that this committee already is aware of the institutional and systemic racism interwoven into existing policies that impacts people of color, people of lower socioeconomic status, as well the social and capitalistic framework constructed to facilitate successful recidivism over successful re-entry. Many of whom have made uneducated and impulsive decisions that have resulted in incarceration. Serving time and completion of punitive sanctions is necessary and debts owed to society must be rectified, that rectification must also be two-fold. Corrections and supervision must also adhere to serve the community by providing accessible and feasible educational opportunities during incarceration.

By supporting SB234 and SB713, Oregon will continue to strive towards excellence through acknowledgement and promotion of education as a pivotal intervention not only reduce recidivism, but to also provide compassionate support for justice-impacted individuals seeking to improve the quality of their lives, become productive and contributing members of society, and serve as inspirational assets to countless others.

Thank you all again for your time and I implore this committee to vote yes on both SB234 and SB713, as well as any other legislation supporting programs, opportunities, and removes societal barriers for justice-impacted individuals.

With Respect, Compassion, and Hope for Second Chances-  
Shawn Thomas Sorensen