

May 13th, 2021

House Committee on Judiciary

Re: Support for SJR 10

Chair Bynum, Vice Chairs Noble and Power, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing today to ask for your support of SJR 10. This proposed amendment would remove the antiquated language of slavery from the Oregon Constitution. Currently, Article 1, Section 34 of our State Constitution reads, "There shall be neither slavery, nor involuntary servitude in the State, otherwise than as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."

This exception clause allows for the constitutional classification of incarcerated individuals as slaves, denying our incarcerated communities dignity and humanity, while perpetuating historic racism. This language is a direct holdover from slavery and is a completely racist holdover from Jim Crow. In her well-researched book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Williams clearly draws the line between the creation of "slave catchers", how these men morphed into the police, and the creation of Jim Crow laws that directly and blatantly targeted Black men and women. Under these laws, if convicted of a crime, these Black men and women would enter a new kind of subjugation: state-sanctioned slavery in the prison system. It was wrong then, and it is completely unacceptable now to allow slavery, under any guise, to perpetuate in the United States.

SJR 10, as introduced, would remove this exception clause from the Oregon Constitution and finally do away with constitutionally permitted slavery in our state. This change in language is an essential step towards amplifying the message that Oregon is committed to being actively anti-racist.

For too long, Oregon has harbored racist ideologies in its laws, which started with the black exclusion laws in 1844 and the additional ratification of two new laws, in 1849 and 1857. These laws were not repealed until 1926. But, Oregon is still disproportionately criminalizing its Black population. While only 2% of Oregonians are Black, Black people account for 9% of the jail and prison populations. In the United States at large, the through-line between policing, systemic racism, and incarceration is well-documented. For instance, Black people are incarcerated at a 430% higher rate than White people. Currently, Oregon is the regional leader in jail admissions, prison admission, and prison population ([vera.org](http://vera.org)). Also, we have the dubious honor of having higher incarceration rates than many developed countries, including the UK, Portugal, Canada, France, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, and Denmark ([prisonpolicy.org](http://prisonpolicy.org)). It is time that Oregon be fully on the right side of history and remove state-sanctioned slavery through incarceration. Incarcerated people are not slaves.

We believe it is imperative that Oregon take this proactive step to demand a more just and equitable future, wherein everyone has the rights, resources, and recognition needed to thrive. I urge this Committee to vote yes on SJR 10, as introduced, to ensure that slavery is truly a thing of the past.

In solidarity,

Emily