

As a lifelong Oregonian, I'd like to thank the committee for hearing public testimony on what I believe is a crucial step toward enshrining racial equity in Oregon's most important document.

Section 34, Article 1 of the Oregon State Constitution represents a major roadblock to equality under the law in Oregon. Not only is this segment of Oregon's most important document permissive of slavery as punishment of a crime, but the text ensures that incarceration is a legal method of extracting unpaid or compelled labor from those who have been entrusted to the State for rehabilitation. This is an unacceptable breach of the state's responsibility to prepare incarcerated individuals for a return to life outside the penal system, and such language has no place in Oregonian law.

What's more, the language present in the Oregon Constitution (which mirrors the language in the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution) is an ugly vestige of post-Reconstruction attempts to build legal loopholes for slavery after its abolition under U.S. Constitutional law by way of legalizing the enslavement of incarcerated individuals and subsequently criminalizing the behavior of those who were meant to be freed by the 13th Amendment. The lingering effects of such racist policies across the United States can still be seen in Oregon today, where Black, Hispanic, and Native/Indigenous Oregonians are incarcerated at much higher rates than white Oregonians (2% of Oregonians are Black, while 10% of incarcerated Oregonians are Black). The loophole included in both the U.S. and Oregon State Constitutions is a direct descendent of the racist policies of the Jim Crow era, and does not deserve any place in our society.

Right now, in the state of Oregon, thousands of incarcerated people are legally enslaved by the State, and bear the physical, psychological, and financial strain of such an injustice. I implore the legislative bodies of Oregon to take action and support SJR 10 to expunge ancient, outdated, and morally repugnant language from the Constitution of our great state.