

Chair Bynum and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to be here this afternoon. My name is Kenneth McGee Jr., I am a community member in Multnomah County. I am here today speaking in support of House Bill 2002.

At the age of 15, I faced a 12 1/2 year Measure 11 mandatory minimum sentence. I made some bad choices and caused harm. I know I needed to be accountable for that. I had a new born child of my own and I was terrified to take my case to trial because I would face the mandatory minimum sentence and a judge would not have influence over the outcome of my case. I made the terrifying decision to take a plea deal for 5 years 10 months.

I served my sentence with no chance to earn time off for good behavior. With high hopes, I returned to the community about 3 years ago looking forward to a fresh start. Very quickly, reality set in. The physical handcuffs had been removed but I was still being punished for decisions I made as a teenager. I never knew how damaging incarceration would be on my employment opportunities, where I could live, and my emotional health. I put in applications for jobs and housing and was denied because of choices I made almost a decade ago.

Since my transition to the community, a highlight has been mentorship through POIC's Community Healing Initiative, specifically their program CHI Elevate. Elevate is a culturally specific program that specializes in working with young Black men like me. Through their programming, I've been able to work closely with a mentor who understands my struggle, who can help me with my limited employment opportunities, and who I can reach out to when I am overwhelmed and losing hope. I am grateful for their support, their advocacy and the connections they have provided me to share my story and make a difference in my community. Any time I am empowered to speak my truth on panels, community events, or to legislators, it helps me heal from the trauma and pain I have experienced in my life.

I support HB 2002 because judges should be able to have influence over sentencing and because we need more funding for programs like CHI Elevate. This bill is an important first step in helping someone like me get back on my feet after making bad choices. I remember the judge looking over my case saying he wished he didn't have to impose the sentence I got. He had no other choice because of Measure 11. Mandatory sentencing doesn't make the community safer and doesn't fix any problems. It just makes existing problems worse. Mandatory minimum sentencing is not the solution. Please support HB2002 for more fairness in our response to crime and for greater investments in programs that help make our community safer.