



LatinoNetwork

February 25, 2021

**Testimony of Arnoldo Ruiz, Program Manager for the Youth Empowerment & Violence Prevention Department
Regarding HB 2002
House Committee on Judiciary**

Chair Bynum, Vice-chairs Power and Sprenger, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2002. My name is Arnoldo Ruiz and I currently work at Latino Network as a program manager for the Youth Empowerment & Violence Prevention Department.

I want to begin by sharing my story. In 1995, several months after Measure 11 went into effect and at the age of 15, I was charged with a Measure 11 offense. After spending 2 months in the local county jail with adult men, I was offered a plea bargain, then remanded to the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) until the age of 25. I spent nearly 3 years in the custody of OYA and was released at 18 years old to a half-way house called Youth Progress Association. After many transition challenges, I reoffended 8 months later and eventually spent the next 19 years of my life in the Oregon Department of Corrections.

I was born in a border town in Texas and until the age of 9 everything inside and outside my home represented my culture. I saw myself in every aspect of my community. When I migrated to Eastern Oregon it was a complete culture shock. The dominant culture highlighted the many differences. Before this moment, I wasn't aware that I was poor, that my English and Spanish were broken. My experiences with teachers and authority figures further emphasized my difference and attacked my culture. The only teacher that showed any interest in me was the football coach at my high school, but I couldn't get to practice due to lack of transportation. At the age of 13, gangs became appealing to me because they reintroduced a sense of pride in my culture and gave me an outlet for expressing myself that my school or other formal settings didn't provide. If a program had existed that offered culturally specific staff and activities that celebrated Latino culture, I believe it would have diverted me from the path towards gang life and criminality.

As a Latino Network mentor and now as program manager, I take pride in being able to provide youth with the services that weren't available to me when I was growing up. I oversee three programs focused on addressing housing insecurity, unaddressed trauma,

cultural indifference, and the negation of indigenous healing practices. As someone who grew up without these services, and now sees youth accessing them, I am heartened to see the joy the youth have in being able to participate in something that affirms their culture.

By addressing these elements youth feel empowered, a sense of belonging, and the feeling that they and their families contribute to their community. Our programs provide individual support and during our summer programming we are able to further expand our support by bringing together 50-70 young people to participate in cultural arts, crafts projects, mural painting, sports activities, and cultural history.

While our programs focus on preventing youth from penetrating the criminal justice system by providing them culturally specific services, these same services are severely limited for youth and adults who have served a Measure 11 term. On numerous occasions, juvenile and adult parole officers that I work with have raised concerns with me about the unavailability of community-based and culturally specific reentry programs. The need for these services is so great, and their impact is powerful, that I frequently use my own personal time to assist youth and adults who have been impacted by Measure 11 by connecting them to resources, sometimes at the request of one of their parole officers.

As a person who has been directly impacted by the criminal justice system and who supports others who are heading down a similar path, I support House Bill 2002 and urge you to vote in favor. Reinvesting funds to culturally specific, community-based organizations that are trauma-informed and centered in healing can provide the bedrock for preventing, intervening, and assisting folks in our community.

Sincerely,

Arnoldo Ruiz
Latino Network
Youth Empowerment & Violence Prevention,
Program Manager