

Submitter: Babak Zolfaghari-Azar

On Behalf  
Of:

Committee: Senate Committee On Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110  
Implementation

Measure: SB1510

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee, for the record my name is Babak Zolfaghari-Azar. I am a community advocate and Transforming Justice Coalition

Oregonians deserve to feel safe and be treated with dignity. But many of us, especially Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color, feel vulnerable and unprotected in our own communities, in part because unnecessary interactions with law enforcement increase risks of violence.

I can recall every detail of the over 15 police stops I have experienced in my life and the countless court appearances as a result of those stops. As a 17 year old minor, the summer after I graduated from high school as an almost straight A student, I was taken to Washington County ADULT jail for “furnishing alcohol to minors” just to be “taught a lesson and scared straight.” Instead, it was one of the most traumatic, dehumanizing experiences of my life. That charge was later dropped to a traffic violation and a large fine in court by the judge.

In my early 20s, as I was finishing my senior year at Portland State University and preparing for the LSAT to go to Law School, I was retraumatized by police when they put me in handcuffs, tormented and belittled me, then illegally searched my car after lying about me “running a red light”... Again using a false traffic stop that I can’t disprove to justify a traumatizing experience that has lasted a lifetime.

There were no public safety threats in any of these stops. Multiple times, police said in court (and of course a judge took their word over mine) that I didn’t signal before turning or didn’t stop all the way at a red light before turning, using that lie as an excuse to violate my freedom, ask me questions unrelated to the stop, and leave me with experiences that have reshaped my life.

Those police stops changed the trajectory of my life, as they do the lives of people of color in our community, our state, and our nation. Fortunately, I lived to talk about it. But the impact has left an imprint on me.

Every time I drive by a cop in the 18 years since my first interaction with police, those dehumanizing experiences run through my mind. I pray that an officer doesn’t pull up behind me. That vehicle, those blue and red sirens, their presence are all triggers to my trauma.

If I get pulled over, will I end up in cuffs? Will I be fighting another court case where my evidence is meaningless versus the word of a cop? How many more years will I have to relive the experiences due to background checks with employers? Will I end up in adult jail, or 6 feet under because of the color of my skin?

If people could only be pulled over because of a public safety concern, not a minor traffic violation, then I would likely not have to live with those concerns. Imagine the number of lives that wouldn't be lost to police brutality. Imagine the difference it would make on people's records, employment opportunities, housing and the overall trajectory of life for families. It is time to see how damaging pretextual stops are on communities of color and how limits on those encounters can help avoid traumatic experiences like mine and save lives.

Please support SB 1510.