

Submitter: Cassie Wilson  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Senate Committee On Human Services  
Measure: SB92

Dear Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice Chair Robinson, and members of the committee,

My name is Cassie Wilson, I'm 24 years old and a resident of Boring. I'm writing to ask that you support this bill which requires the Department of Human Services to study potential strategies to ensure that recipients of public benefits who are eligible to serve on boards or commissions can be compensated for their service without losing eligibility for benefits.

For the past few years, I've had the pleasure of serving on numerous advisory boards for Clackamas County, and I currently serve on TriMet's Committee on Accessible Transportation. I'm disabled and up until recently I relied on Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

For those who don't know, SSI exists to keep disabled people and older adults out of poverty, but it's trapping 8 million people, including almost 90,000 Oregonians as of 2019, in the poverty it was designed to eliminate. My annual income on SSI was less than \$7,000. I was not allowed to have more than \$2000 in assets. The exception is saving money in an ABLE savings account — a special program that states have to opt into. Oregon is one of those states, but it takes \$35+ in annual fees. If I were allowed to keep my savings in my bank account I wouldn't lose money while trying to save. If I earned more than \$85/mo, my SSI was reduced. Additionally, I didn't have marriage equality because my future partner's income would count against me and disqualify me from SSI. It's a dehumanizing, outdated system that unfortunately doesn't appear to be changing any time soon.

To make matters worse, the \$85/mo income limit is so small that I have repeatedly had to decline compensation when it has been offered for things I otherwise am just volunteering to do, whether for nonprofits or for government boards, because it would impact my SSI. Some might say, "If you can serve on a government board, commission, committee, etc., then you should be able to work." Myself and so many other disabled people WANT to work, but many jobs are not accessible to us. In my case, a lot of jobs that are accessible to me require a bachelor's degree, but I'm still finishing school. It was because of my volunteer work for nonprofits and in serving on government committees that I was able to gain the skills and experience needed to start qualifying for jobs which are accessible to me. Up until that point, SSI was my only option, but it kept me below the poverty line.

The only form of compensation I was ever able to accept while on SSI was in the

form of gift cards, and, again, when you're below the poverty line it makes a tremendous difference. Though, it is still a bit fuzzy to me on if that was technically income that should be reported. People shouldn't have to wonder or fear if accepting compensation will harm them, hence the importance of this study.

Additionally, many people who rely on public benefits come from underrepresented groups. Disabled people, low income people, veterans, seniors, and more often rely on public benefits. All of these groups bring much needed unique perspectives to issues facing our communities, and we're all better off when they're able to serve on boards and commissions. It can be a lot of mental and emotional labor to represent the experiences of marginalized groups. They deserve the opportunity to be compensated without penalty if the option exists.

It's unclear to me if this study would just focus on compensation for state level boards and commissions, but I hope the outcome includes recommendations that can be applied to boards and commissions at all levels of government.

Please join me in supporting Senate Bill 92.

Thank you,

Cassie Wilson