

Oregon Coalition of Christian Voices

Testimony on SB579

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, members of the committee;

My name is Karen Nettler. I am a board member of Oregon Coalition of Christian Voices. We assess public policies from our faith perspective and advocate for those policies that promote the dignity and worth of all citizens, and particularly those who are marginalized, those whose voices are often not heard.

I am writing in support of SB579, a bill that well fits the criteria for our advocacy, as it addresses an injustice perpetrated on a most marginalized group, the incarcerated. The incarcerated are of special concern to Jesus, who spoke on behalf of prisoners, seeing them as equally worthy of our concern and care.

We support SB579 for the following reasons:

- The incarcerated have lost their freedom, not their citizenship. Being able to vote is a fundamental right, unrelated to a person's conduct or character. Denying them the vote is contrary to our stated values and beliefs as a society.
- Voter disenfranchisement of prisoners has deep roots in racist policies, aimed at creating barriers to voting for those deemed less desirable. In Oregon, as is true in most states, Blacks make up a disproportionate number of incarcerated citizens, and denying them the vote perpetuates that racist practice.
- Not being able to vote deprives prisoners of having a say in policies that affect them, their families, their neighborhoods to which they are likely to return. It suggests that, because they committed a crime, their vote has no value to society.
- The purpose of incarceration aspires to be that of protecting society, as well as to punish the wrongdoing. Denying prisoners the vote does nothing to protect society; rather, it can foster a prisoner's sense of alienation, which serves neither the prisoner nor society well.
- Denying prisoners the right to vote doesn't make sense. The same person who is denied the right to vote as a prisoner regains that right the day of release from prison. It only serves as yet another punitive measure, unrelated to the offense.
- Giving prisoners the right to vote helps maintain a connection to their community and family. We should be doing everything we can to make it possible for those prisoners who, concerned enough about their community and the future, would use their right to vote, given the chance. We should as a society desire that engagement on their part.
- We believe in restorative justice, that offers ways for prisoners to maintain their sense of worth and dignity. Our faith calls us to speak out against punitive policies, and to advocate for policies that recognize the God-given dignity of all and the potential for redemption and restoration. We see restoring voting rights to the incarcerated as fulfilling what scripture calls us to do as a society; to do justice and to love mercy.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Nettler, OCCV board chair