



Oregon Commission on Black Affairs

Advocating for Equity and Diversity throughout Oregon

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary,

For the record, my name is Dr. Silky Booker, and I serve as the Vice Chair of the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs (OCBA). On behalf of the Commission, I encourage the passage of SB 579, which would grant voting rights to incarcerated individuals, and urge the Committee to join in support as well.

The Oregon Commission on Black Affairs (OCBA) serves the people of Oregon to empower and support the African American and Black communities through our special roles as policy advisors to Oregon state policy makers and leaders. OCBA is a catalyst that empowers partnerships between state government and our community in rural and urban areas to ensure success for all African American and Black Oregonians by addressing longstanding and emerging issues at the policy level including but not limited to social, political, legal, and economic equity. OCBA has several statutory duties, all of which revolve around advocacy and equity.

As many people before me have made clear, our right to vote is enshrined in our constitution. For more than half of the population, it is the *only* right enshrined in our constitution. And yet, nearly 12,000 Oregonians cannot vote. Why? Because of legislation like Measure 11.

While justice must be served for crimes committed, it is no secret that our prison system is a modern-day form of slavery – it’s written right there, in the 13th Amendment. It is also no secret that far too many people serving time are behind bars because of racial profiling. Because while “innocent until proven guilty” may be the justice system for white Oregonians, for Black, Brown, Latino, and other communities of color, it’s “guilty until proven innocent.”

Our prisons are often located in rural, mostly white areas. Which means they are counted for representation, yet, excluded from the decision-making processes.

The passage of SB 579 would take a different approach to our justice system. By encouraging reform, accountability, and self-reflection, we could take a more dignified approach and make incarcerated individuals feel a part of society. We could provide incarcerated individuals access to information that helps them make informed decisions about how to vote, who to vote for, and other issues that affect their everyday lives.

Sense of exclusion is often the biggest reason for relapse, whether that’s substance, crime, or any of our other vices. Guaranteeing the right to vote helps fulfill the promise of our democracy and addresses

Oregon Commission on Black Affairs

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racial inequities. The prison system is a vicious cycle and stripping citizens of their democratic right to vote only perpetuates it.

It is far past due that we right the wrongs of history. We can do that with this critical bill by allowing incarcerated individuals a voice in every decision being made about their lives. Laws are meant to be changed and updated, and this one is far overdue for an update.


Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Silky Booker', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Silky Booker



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