

May 3, 2023

To: Joint Committee On Ways and Means  
From: Kyle Hedquist, Policy Associate

**Re: Testimony in Support of SB 579**

Co-Chair Steiner, Co-Chair Sanchez, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kyle Hedquist and I am a Policy Associate at the Oregon Justice Resource Center. I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 579.

Last November, I did something new. I've been doing a lot of new things in the nine months since I was released from prison, but this was something special. I voted for the first time in my life. It might sound silly to those of you who've been voting throughout your adult lives, but for me it was a milestone. Just like getting my driver's license or joining the YMCA, this was a sign for me that I am part of the community. I'm on the outside of those walls, now living my life and doing my best to make a positive contribution.

I take the responsibility of voting extremely seriously. For me and others like me who've been released from prison, staying out of trouble is easier when we are connected to people around us – our families, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors, and our wider communities. There's no shortage of research on how connection to community helps prevent reoffending and recidivism, and trust me, I know how important those connections can be from my own experience. In that way, voting is a public safety issue. It's one piece of the puzzle to building a life where you give back rather than take from your community.

Although this was my first election as a voter, I have always been highly engaged with politics and elections even while incarcerated. That's true of many people in prison. You might be surprised about the debates we had, the mock elections, the friendly arguments about candidates and issues. Politics matters, even in prison. In fact, this bill began as an idea that came from the Oregon Justice Resource Center's - work with men at the Oregon State Correctional Institution – OSCI. The incarcerated individuals at OSCI have encouraged us to reinstate voting rights for prisoners. They have advocated for this bill. They want to vote. They want to be heard. They care about what's happening outside the prison walls. They have families, and kids, and they want to be part of their lives in any way they can. Being able to participate in the process of choosing who leads our community is a way that they can do that.

Another group of people in prison that I have personally witnessed having a strong desire to be voters is our veterans. Unfortunately, we have a lot of veterans in prison. They've made sacrifices for our country and many feel they did that to defend our rights and our Constitution. In fact, the veterans' club at the Oregon State Penitentiary used to host mock elections. There is a great energy and enthusiasm among Oregonians in prison to be able to exercise their rights as citizens.

We talk about voting as a right and also a responsibility. I think encouraging that sense of responsibility to the wider community can only pay dividends when it comes to rehabilitation and getting people on the right path when they are released. Nearly everyone in prison will be coming back to the community one day. Let's get them thinking about the responsibility they bear to others by giving them a chance to use their rights as citizens by voting. Filling out my ballot last November made me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself. I want all Oregonians to feel that. Co-Chair Steiner, Co-Chair Sanchez, and members of the committee you can guarantee that right by supporting Senate Bill 579 and passing it out of committee!

Thank you.