

Next Up  
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To whom it may concern,

I recently received a card in the mail requesting my feedback for the Oregon Legislature in regards to voting rights for the incarcerated (SB 579). I am thankful for the opportunity to be included in this process, and hope that I may be able to provide some useful feedback.

I have never previously voted. I have spent over half my life incarcerated, starting with boarding schools as a teenager, and ending up in prison shortly after I turned 18. I had never had opportunity to vote, and at that time in my life would have not known anything about what was on the ballot anyways. Ignorant voting is not really a good idea. I'm thankful that I never contributed to that sort of thing. I'm now much older though, and do try to keep an ear on what is happening in the political field of Oregon. Someday, I may be living in the community again, and I'd love to know that I was included in that.

I support SB 579, and allowing prisoners to vote, wholeheartedly. It is my personal belief that not all prisoners think alike, when it comes to voting. You would be surprised that, despite being incarcerated, political divides remain, even in regards to treatment of the incarcerated. There are those who have gotten inordinate amounts of prison time who still see that tough sentences should be enforced, and those who feel the complete opposite in that taxpayer is just paying for a person who has been self-rehabilitated to reside in prison for no good reason. Of course, there are many things to vote on outside of prisoner treatment and sentencing reform, but I use those as an example to demonstrate the differences that exist in this environment.

I believe felony disenfranchisement is a disservice to our state and our nation as a whole. You have antiquated laws, based in a history of racism, that were used to keep blacks and others from being able to vote and have a say in their own treatment. Still, Oregon continues to have a higher percentage of black people in prison than represented by the population as a whole. These folks end up unable to vote to elect change that could benefit their community. It perpetuates the cycle. Oregon is attempting to institute this "Oregon Way" in the Department of Corrections, which believes in the humanization of prisoners and a more community oriented, rather than security oriented, mindset. While this is most definitely a fledgling work, it should be looked at from a greater perspective, in how prisoners can be invested and connected with the outside community. DOC has a long practice of isolating prisoners from community and making it costly to connect with family and friends. For a prisoner to be able to vote, it would allow at least one small tie to the community to remain, and one that costs the prisoner nothing

but the time that it takes to register and to vote. They would have a reason to keep some of their focus on the outside world, that doesn't have to cost them anything.

For me to be able to vote in prison, it would mean that I stand more united with the rest of Oregon. It would allow me to say "I'm invested in this state. It is where I live, and I care about what goes on here." I would be able to talk with friends and loved ones who live here and understand what they face on a daily basis. What does the community need? What will make Oregon the state that communities want and envision? What will keep it healthy and allow for it to grow? I would love to be able to vote now, to help add my voice to equal rights movements, sentencing reform, protecting our children's education, and helping get folks off the streets and into affordable housing.

If I had to tell the legislature something, I would tell them this: The 14,000 incarcerated people living in Oregon prisons are still Oregonians. Our current constitution strips Oregon prisoners of our civil rights and liberties, and distances us from our communities in ways that are harmful to the state as a whole. Should not Oregon value *all* of its citizens? We have opinions and views that vary as far and wide as anyone who isn't incarcerated. We need more inclusivity with our communities, to feel like Oregon is our home, not just our jailer. Help us feel like Oregon still cares about us, and we will show you that we still care about Oregon. We just need the voice to be able to speak, and the opportunity to make a difference.

I'm not the most eloquent of speakers or writers, but I'm always willing to lend my voice to a movement that requires attention. I believe that giving prisoners their right to vote back would be a great step towards building a state that values all its citizens, and ensures that everybody is connected to their community in at least some small way. I want to thank the people at Next Up for the opportunity to write on this subject. Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information or feedback.

Sincerely,



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