

Submitter: Catherine Bax
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Judiciary
Measure: SB1560

RE: Support Compassionate Medical Release Reform, SB 1560
Senate Committee on Judiciary
February 7, 2024

Thank you, Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher and members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary, for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 1560. My name is Catherine Bax. I am a retired Physician Assistant and currently a member/volunteer of Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good, a broad-based community organizing alliance and a member of St Andrew Catholic Church. It is my background of having worked for over 30 years as a medical professional, being a community volunteer and being a member of a faith-based organization that compels me to testify in support of SB 1560.

This bill makes sense economically, practically and, most importantly from a humanitarian perspective. As I understand it, SB1560 would create a study group/legislative task force to investigate and then present the best practices to find a way to make it possible for seriously and terminally ill incarcerated patients to be released early from prison. Looking at the numbers over the last decade, Oregon has the fourth largest aging prison population in the country. Caring for these seriously ill and even dying patients within the Oregon state prison system is costly, inhumane and unnecessary.

This bill is not an effort to find a way to release from prison every "sickish" person or any person who obviously poses an immediate threat to the community. The idea is to figure out a way to look at each individual Adult in Custody and identify those who are seriously sick and/or dying and who are not a public safety risk and get them out of prison and back in the community. This would allow them to be cared for in a more medically appropriate and compassionate setting, ideally by their family and loved ones. Presently early or compassionate release of Oregon prisoners occurs relatively infrequently even though Oregon has a rapidly aging prison population and a high percentage of incarcerated people with serious progressive and terminal illnesses.

I think it is inspiring that the criminal justice system, the prisoner advocacy community, the medical community in Oregon and the Oregon Legislature have been looking over the last several years for a way to address the ethical and human dignity concerns of our state's seriously and terminally ill incarcerated men and women. SB 1560 is a beginning. Please move this process forward.

The burden and the opportunity to recognize the dignity of all human beings throughout their lives is incumbent on all of us. Actually, I think, it is one of the most important things we can do for each other.

Catherine Bax, Physician Assistant, retired