

Submitter: Mel Rondon

On Behalf Of:

Committee: Joint Committee On Addiction and Community Safety Response

Measure: HB4002

My name is Mel Rondon and I work with young people facing homelessness, addiction, poverty, and other adversities in Eugene. I am an auntie, a harm reductionist, and a social worker, in that order.

Prior to moving to Oregon in January of 2020, I lived in Texas, a state well-known for its "tough on crime" approach. From the front door of my Dallas apartment, you could walk approximately 40 feet, duck through a hole in the fence out to the alley, and immediately find yourself in the city's biggest IV drug use hotspot. At all hours of the day and night, year after year after year, dozens of people would mill in and out of that liminal space to inject drugs -- a criminal offense in Texas.

Where were the police, you may ask? Oh, they were present -- often multiple times a day -- and yet the IV use went on, completely undeterred by repeated arrests, charges, and jail stays for the folks who frequented the alley. People would disappear for a couple days or weeks in Lew Sterrett Jail, then return to the alley immediately upon release, needle in hand. Since there were no legal needle exchanges during that time, folks would leave their used needles wherever they fell. Because of the hot spot's location directly across the street from a Head Start program, I'm sure you can understand how this was particularly problematic.

In effort to reduce the number of used needles in my neighborhood, I undertook a very risky project -- setting up a covert needle drop at the fence and taking the needles for safe disposal. From a legal perspective, I was collecting decades worth of felony drug charges each week into detergent containers and transporting drugs and drug paraphernalia every time I drove to the disposal site. From a community perspective, I was stepping in where our systems had failed us and contributing to a safer, healthier neighborhood -- at great personal risk.

I know through lived experience that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, but connection -- and fortunately, no one needs to take my word for it. We have already witnessed the abject, decades-long failure of criminalization at mitigating the addiction crisis. In fact, under the "watch" of the War on Drugs, use and abuse of substances have continued to increase, and the overdose death toll nationwide continues to climb, unabated by criminalization.

It would be foolhardy to expect a different result from the same strategy with over 40 years of demonstrated failure behind it.

Furthermore, a vast and ever-growing body of research shows us conclusively that the way through our present addiction crisis lies not in pushing people farther from community through criminalization, but in drawing them closer through investment in both individual and community wellbeing.

Affordable housing, quality health care, robust education, income equity, affordable child care, paid parental leave, accessible public transportation, updated infrastructure -- these things don't have the same pizzazz as a "tough on crime approach," but they're the things we need to be focusing on if we want actual solutions to our present crises. The idea of a heroic savior in a law enforcement uniform sweeping away all the human evidence of our crumbling communities is appealing in its simplicity -- and it is a fantasy. No one, not even the police, can save us from ourselves. We must approach this differently if we expect different results.

HB 4002 is at best inadequate and at worst harmful towards achieving our mutual goal of safer, healthier communities. To adopt it would be to take a colossal step backward, and it will harm all Oregonians if implemented. In my view, advocating against this bill is an opportunity for harm reduction, one I feel compelled to take for the safety of my adoptive community.