

Clayton Woullard
Feb. 6, 2024

Co-Charis Leiber and Kropf, members of the Joint Committee on Addiction and Community Safety Response,

My name is Clayton Woullard and I am a certified recovery mentor living in Beaverton, Oregon.

I am writing today in opposition of HB 4002 and recriminalization.

I am someone who identifies as being in long-term recovery from addiction who now works in the field of behavioral health. I became homeless in 2016 as a result of my own addiction struggles and remained so for about a year, most of which was in the Portland Metro area. I at one point was more of an advocate of providing criminal penalties for drug use and possession, thinking that would be a pathway to motivate people abusing drugs and causing harm to those around them to seek help and get sober.

But what I witnessed while houseless was that many of them had already faced such consequences and been to jail or prison, which either caused trauma or compounded it (most addicts having experienced trauma in the early parts of their lives). Many may have got clean and sober in jail or prison but many continued their addiction in those settings or went right back to their addiction when they got out, especially if there was no support offered when they got out and they were right back on the streets, often without housing. This is especially true among fellow Black folks who are overrepresented in the houseless population in Portland because of decades of laws and police behavior that leads to more arrests and convictions of us, leading to jail or prison time, and a lack of adequate culturally-sensitive addiction and behavioral health services.

I also saw living at a sober house for more than four years in Beaverton that many would go back into addiction because of legal barriers to better or supportive housing and a job they could maintain because of their criminal history, and a lack of pathways to being able to expunge their record. Having a criminal history because of their addiction, something they didn't choose and is not a moral failing but a health issue, puts barriers to actually being able to be productive members of society which is supposedly one of the aims of recriminalization. I was fortunate to come out of houselessness without a criminal record, but many I knew and met were not as fortunate, and such convictions were not necessarily an adequate motivator for them to choose recovery. I think most people in Oregon are more concerned with the criminality and destruction or theft that can result from people's addictive behavior, for which there are still laws on the books to enforce. No one should be given a criminal history simply for being victim to the illness

of addiction, especially when many of them struggle with severe mental illness for which there are very few resources in Oregon.

We can all agree that more needs to be done to address the lack of affordable housing, mental health, and addiction services in our communities. But investments from Measure 110 have been too slow, which means slower improvements in addiction services, mental healthcare, and affordable housing. Now that Measure 110 is in place, it is funding some of Oregon's most critical services, including some of the only behavioral health services that people can receive without insurance and without a diagnosis. Rather than throwing people in jail, we need to build a better system with real solutions that make all of our families healthier and communities safer.

There is a 49% gap between the amount of substance disorder treatment that is needed and what is currently available. Fifty percent of substance use service providers say they do not have capacity to meet demand. There is an estimated 51% gap in healthcare providers authorized to prescribe buprenorphine, a life-saving medicine to help treat opioid addiction. We shouldn't expect the police to solve social problems like mental illness, homelessness, or addiction — and we cannot arrest our way out of these problems. It's time for solutions that let mental health and drug treatment professionals help people who need and want treatment, freeing up police to focus on violent crime instead of implementing controversial policies that disproportionately harm Black and Brown communities and our houseless neighbors.

Even if recriminalization did provide consequences to propel people into recovery, we still don't have the adequate trauma-informed treatment and supportive housing to provide the proper environment for people to actually thrive in recovery and pursue paths toward healing. We need to be patient as the funds from Measure 110 create these better systems.

We urge you to reject calls to return to the failed War on Drugs that harmed our communities and stole the futures of so many Black and Brown Oregonians. We have the opportunity to do better and we must do better. We know that harsh drug laws don't prevent drug use and addiction: 32 states have higher overdose rates than Oregon, and all of them have harsher drug laws. Locking up people struggling with addiction isn't going to solve the problems we face. We all deserve to be safe, regardless of where we live, how we look, or who we are. The reliance on punishment and prison hasn't worked — we can improve public safety by focusing on preventing and addressing the root causes of crime — like poverty and lack of opportunity. We need to invest in proven solutions, such as access to mental health and addiction services.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony on this issue.

Criminalization does not equate to compassionate consequences for addiction, a public health issue. It just puts people on a path toward traumatization or retraumatization and keeps them trapped in a system that's not working and is ill-equipped right now to adequately help them.

I urge the committee to find real solutions, real safety, real healing, not take us back to the failed War on Drugs.

Sincerely,
Clayton Woullard