

Dr. Angela Carter; testimony for the 02/07/2024 Joint Committee On Addiction and Community Safety Response regarding SB 1555 -

Position: Oppose

Why are the legislative bodies of Oregon continuing to entertain carceral drug policy recommendations with clearly demonstrated historical failure? Carceral drug policies contradict all evidence-based practices endorsed by science, medicine, and public policy, they harm individuals already struggling with their mental health, and they destroy our communities. Why are 50 years of well documented evidence of policy failure not enough?

You are all learned individuals with capacity to understand scientific literature and extrapolate knowledge from data. I assume you are all well aware of the data on issues for which you are creating policy therefore I will not insult your intelligence or waste our time expounding upon the science of managing substance use disorders.

65% of people incarcerated in America's prisons have a mental health diagnosis of a substance use disorder (Center on Addiction, 2010). People incarcerated for drug use by and large do not recover from substance use disorders. In fact, incarceration incurs more traumatic mental health conditions that spur more substance use, increases overdose deaths, and pervasively damages families and communities (Binswanger, 2007) . Moreover, it is morally reprehensible and illegal to incarcerate people purely on the basis of a mental health diagnosis. Incarceration for public drug use will do nothing to help people who are struggling with trauma to heal. It will do nothing to prevent the addiction epidemic from growing. It will make it much worse.

Making public drug use illegal targets the most marginalized and disadvantaged people in our society, our houseless individuals. Those who feel no hope and have no other option than to use on the street are the people who need the most aid, and the people who will be the most negatively impacted by additional dysfunctional punitive measures. Policy that criminalizes public substance use simply further criminalizes houselessness. As we know, poverty follows lines of marginalization, therefore criminalizing the activities of houseless people primarily and disproportionately targets people of color, queer and transgender people, and people with disabilities. Is it ethical to arrest and incarcerate marginalized people for governmental failure to offer relevant support and services to lift them up from the poverty which the system itself has created?

If you want to help curb the addiction epidemic, take the management of mental health concerns out of the hands of law enforcement. Ask for assistance from community-based organizations that hold great wisdom in the fields of health care and social justice that have built connections and trust with people struggling with drug use. Fund these orgs to send out street-based Peer support specialists, certified recovery mentors, social workers, medical providers, and community members to offer people using substances on the street harm reduction strategies, access to resources, substance use and mental health education, and referral to the Measure 110 BHRNS. Build safer use sites. Put sharps containers in parks and public bathrooms. Give people food, assistance in obtaining education, meaningful work, and other means of uplifting themselves. Give people the opportunity to create lives with hope in which they can heal, find connection, and feel a personal sense of purpose and value to their communities. Social support will have much greater positive impacts on the wellbeing of our communities. Get people into housing. Housing is cheaper than prison.

If we keep trying to cover up the symptoms of the systemic diseases of racism, poverty, marginalization and trauma with short sighted, harmful, penalizing policies with historical evidence of harm, these diseases will only expand. These policy proposals temporarily sweep the real problem under a rug, only to crawl back out with 10 more heads. You must address the root causes of drug use to effect real change. Incarceration of our most vulnerable and traumatized people is not the answer.

It is clear in all aspects of the scientific and historical data that criminalizing drug use does nothing to curb the addiction epidemic. The discussion of recriminalization is a waste of everyone's time and resources. It is time to refocus our attention to evidence-based, health-promoting policy that will actually effect real change.

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