

Submitter: Melinda Venegas  
On Behalf Of: No to criminalization  
Committee: Joint Committee On Addiction and Community Safety Response  
Measure: HB4002

I oppose HB 4002 and efforts to criminalize addiction.

Addiction is a healthcare issue, not a crime. We cannot address the addiction crisis with arrests and jails, which add barriers to stable housing and increase overdose deaths. Instead our communities need more investments in treatment, including outreach teams and peer mentor programs. People need help, not handcuffs.

I have a son who is struggling with addiction because there are mental health issues that need to be addressed. From my experience and from other experiences there is a link to mental health issues and addiction for various lived experiences. My son was arrested in Washington, and has been in arrested three times and every time he has been under the influence of something that led to the events. I have advocated for him each time, asking them to give him a mental health evaluation, which they will not. I have to find a way to pay for it while he is in there. His last arrest, he was on suicide watch, and all they did was put him in a stray jacket until they felt he was safe enough to be out in GP. And while he was out in GP the way they "helped" was the nursing staff would ask "are you going to hurt yourself or are you going to harm someone else?" and to give pills. The criminal system does not address the root of the problem. The incarcerated individuals don't get the help they need while being jailed, which leads to unresolved mental health issues, which is a cycle of incarceration, and more traumatic experiences, which can and will lead to more drug use for the continuation of drug addiction. Addiction is very much a healthcare issue!

Arresting and jailing people for addiction has never worked. Criminalization has inflicted decades of government harm and violence on Black and brown communities. Giving a new name to the old war on drugs won't change the results: HB 4002 will harm, not help, Oregonians.

People suffering from addiction need investments to the continuum of care. They need successful peer outreach and mobile crisis programs to help move people into housing and services. And we need law enforcement and service providers to work together to connect people to services. Oregon can do this work without making addiction a crime. This is the direction that our state should head.

I urge you to oppose HB 4002 and efforts to criminalize addiction.