

Submitter: Marianne Brisson
On Behalf Of: OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon
Committee: Senate Committee On Judiciary
Measure: SB1553

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in opposition to SB 1553-1.

OPAL's work is at the intersection of environmental justice, civil rights, and transportation and housing. We oppose SB 1553-1; especially the amendment which would make illegal drug use on public transit or near transit stops a Class A Misdemeanor.

OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon and our bus riders union, Bus Riders Unite (BRU), envision a world where all people, particularly marginalized and impacted communities, can access safe, high-quality transit with frequent service. We see a world where transit is a center of community building, where people don't have to live in fear of police violence — or any violence — in public spaces, and a world in which transportation is a free, public service that is understood to be a human right.

OPAL agrees that public spaces and public services should feel safe and comfortable for everyone to use, particularly the most vulnerable in our community. TriMet and SB 1553-1 suggest that their approach of increasing police and reclassifying drug use on public transit or transit stops as a Class A Misdemeanor will "give people experiencing addiction a path to help." We know, however, that incarceration and hefty fines to those who cannot pay them are not, in fact, part of a true pathway to help. The few instances of drug use that are occurring on public transit or near transit stops are the direct result of the intersecting crises of homelessness — due, in large part, to rising wealth inequality and structural poverty — and the unfolding fentanyl and opioid epidemic.

In fact, the act of criminalizing drug possession not only adds to the societal stigma surrounding it but also discourages individuals from actively seeking voluntary health services, such as treatment for substance use disorders (SUD). This stigma further hampers the delivery of healthcare, as individuals with substance use needs often express experiencing mistreatment from service providers due to their drug use.

Further, the dangers posed by transit police to BIPOC communities are well-documented. We fear that public transit agencies, such as TriMet, will use this bill to increase policing on public transit and specifically target Black and brown communities. Relying on policing as a response to addiction is not a short or long-term solution. It is also not what our community needs or deserves.

Instead, OPAL advocates for community-based solutions that invest in mental health and substance misuse treatment, social workers, and the disarmament of police.

Safety is not just about low risk of crime or danger—it is about having access to transit without fear of harassment and intimidation. Expanding support for programs such as the Rider Ambassador Program would provide community support and rider safety, without the use of force, harassment, incarceration, or fines.

OPAL believes in a safe and just transit system. Funding community resources and services, such as free public transportation, free health care, and affordable housing are directly linked to stronger outcomes for all, especially those facing the greatest disparity in the lived environment due to historical and ongoing systems of oppression. Access to resources and opportunities, such as employment, fosters safer neighborhoods because it discourages illegitimate activity.

Sincerely,

OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon