

TO: Joint Committee On Addiction and Community Safety Response
FROM: Jesse Merrithew
DATE: February 27, 2024
RE: Opposition to HB 4002 -24

Co-chairs Lieber and Kropf and members of the committee:

My name is Jesse Merrithew and I am a civil rights lawyer who represents many individuals who have their civil rights violated in jails or prisons. I am here in opposition to HB 4002.

Two Basic Facts:

- 1) A jail cell is not a safe place for someone in the throes of substance abuse.
- 2) There are no treatment beds available for those that need them.

So, while you can use all the language you want about how you are attempting to put people into treatment, it is not going to happen in Oregon today. You are placing addicts in jail.

You are making the same mistake that people identified as the central failing of BM110. It takes time from when money is allocated until a bed is actually available for those in need.

The difference now is that, instead of leaving people on the street to suffer in public; you are going to leave people in jail cells to suffer out of sight and out of mind.

These people are still going to die. It will just be in a jail cell instead of a street corner. A jail cell where their friends cannot administer Narcan or call 911. A jail cell is the only place you can be in America and be lawfully cut off from our emergency care network. Where your ability to access that network is dependent on the whim of corrections officers.

Multnomah County probably has the most robust health care staffing of any jail in this state. Nevertheless, in 2023, 10 people died in Multnomah County jails. Zero died in 2021 or 2022. In the public hearing that followed these deaths, the Sheriff, jail commander, and health director all pointed to the same basic underlying causes: rising jail population and fentanyl addiction within the jail. This bill is certain to exacerbate both of these problems. It is going to kill people. But out of sight, out of mind, right?