

HB 2631 will improve the health and safety of Oregon communities by providing reentry-focused civil legal assistance to women during incarceration.

## THE ISSUE

Almost everyone incarcerated in Oregon will return to our communities one day. Many will cycle through our criminal justice system more than once, caught in a cycle of poverty, marginalization, crime, and incarceration. Our communities pay a high price for this cycle. Being equipped with new skills and a genuine commitment to change may not be enough for post-prison success due to overwhelming legal, social, and economic barriers.

Many challenges faced by formerly incarcerated people are the result of civil legal issues unaddressed during or exacerbated by incarceration, as well as more than a thousand Oregon laws and policies that bar people with criminal records from fully participating in society. Legal issues may include: loss of child custody and parental rights; debt; employment and housing discrimination; and

lack of access to benefits and other basic human needs. Unfortunately, at present, access to civil legal services is difficult to obtain. Once released, most people lack the funds to hire an attorney. Pro bono attorney programs and legal aid services are unable to meet the high demand. In addition, due to the specialized nature of legal work and the breadth of legal issues one person may face, attorneys are generally unable to assist.

By contrast, investing in civil legal services for currently incarcerated people will help reduce the risk of recidivism and increase the chances of stability. Tackling problems *before* they spiral out of control will save resources later. Helping people get ready for their return to society makes sense and benefits incarcerated Oregonians, their families, and our communities.

*"We are a nation that believes in second chances. Providing legal services to help individuals make a successful transition back to their communities, while also empowering them with the skills necessary to find a good job and thrive in the workplace, will help strengthen our economy and our society."*

Former U.S. Secretary of Labor

## WHAT DOES HB 2631 DO?

- ✓ Funds a two-year pilot program serving women incarcerated at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF)
- ✓ Prepares women for a more successful reentry by helping them resolve and navigate their civil legal needs before they leave prison
- ✓ Provides access to civil legal assistance via three (3 FTE) Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC) attorneys at a cost of \$800,000 (for the biennium)
- ✓ Offers a statewide service, helping women returning to counties throughout Oregon
- ✓ Puts to good use the relatively stable environment women experience in prison to address their problems
- ✓ Dedicates attorneys to working solely at CCCF to better address the unique needs of justice-involved women

## EXAMPLES OF ASSISTANCE

- ✓ Ensuring that healthy mother-child relationships are maintained during incarceration
- ✓ Addressing debt and bad credit histories
- ✓ Obtaining important documents such as identification, birth certificates, health records, immigration documents, and adoption records
- ✓ Advising on court holds and detainers
- ✓ Securing and protecting personal property needed for reentry

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*Q. How will funding these services make a positive difference to Oregon?*

A. Research shows that investment in reentry services and civil legal assistance saves taxpayer dollars and contributes to healthier and safer communities. For every dollar invested in reentry, the state saves as much as \$14. For every dollar invested in civil legal assistance to low-income individuals, the state saves \$3-11. Civil legal services reduce domestic violence rates and associated law enforcement costs, reduce family separation and time in foster care for children, encourage better health through improved access to medical care, and can reduce re-arrest rates. Research suggests that reentry-focused civil legal services for incarcerated people can create a beneficial multiplier effect for Oregon and its residents.

*Q. Why focus on women?*

A. Over the last 30 years, the number of women in the criminal justice system has increased dramatically. Since 1995, the number of men in Oregon's prison system has increased by about 75% while the number of women in

prison in our state has almost tripled. Many incarcerated women struggle with addiction, mental illness, and histories of abuse and trauma. Most are mothers so their being stuck in a cycle of crime and incarceration has an especially devastating impact on their children and our communities. Women tend to be particularly underserved and unseen when returning to their communities.

*Q. Why use OJRC attorneys?*

A. Lawyers from the OJRC have been working with women at CCCF on civil legal issues since 2014. Their skills of problem-solving, collaboration, synthesizing information, and communication are a good fit for a range of needs. The organizational support of the OJRC provides attorneys and their clients with more resources and expertise and the benefits of more collaboration with other community providers. As a legal resource center, the OJRC is well-equipped to learn from the experiences of providing legal assistance, provide quality public and stakeholder education, and help to identify reforms which can improve re-entry for greater numbers of people and advance the health and safety of our communities.

*"I've worked with thousands of people in reentry following incarceration. I know that legal guidance is one of the most pressing needs of this community, particularly for women. Legal burdens create additional barriers during an already difficult transition. Even in counties with community resources for people post-prison, women are rarely included and free or low-cost legal services are almost non-existent. Providing legal services in CCCF will help women make a better transition."*

Ailene Farkac, MSW, reentry navigator and formerly incarcerated person

## THE BOTTOM LINE

By making a modest investment now in civil legal assistance during incarceration, Oregon can save taxpayer dollars and improve the health and safety of our families and communities.

## ORGANIZATIONS IN SUPPORT



Questions? Contact Julia Yoshimoto, Project Director and Attorney, Women's Justice Project, Oregon Justice Resource Center, or Bobbin Singh, Executive Director, at 503-944-2270 or [jyoshimoto@ojrc.info](mailto:jyoshimoto@ojrc.info) / [bsingh@ojrc.info](mailto:bsingh@ojrc.info).