

**February 18, 2019**

The Honorable Jennifer Williamson, Chair  
The Honorable Sherrie Sprenger, Vice-Chair  
The Honorable Chris Gorsek, Vice Chair  
House Judiciary Committee Members

**Re: Testimony in Support of HB 2631  
From Bobbin Singh, Oregon Justice Resource Center**

Dear Chair Williamson and Members of Committee,

My name is Bobbin Singh and I am the Executive Director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC). Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 2631. **HB 2631 will improve the health and safety of Oregon communities by providing reentry-focused civil legal assistance to women during incarceration.**

The OJRC was founded in 2011 and is a family of unique programs addressing the unmet needs for legal services and advancing reform in our state. Our clients are currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and we provide our services at no cost to the clients. We believe for real change to occur, we must use an interdisciplinary approach to reform anchored in legal services.

One of the OJRC's projects is the Women's Justice Project, which amongst its other work, provides reentry legal assistance to women incarcerated in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF). We are before the legislature this session proposing a pilot reentry-focused civil legal program that would be funded by the State of Oregon. As a pilot, over the next biennium, three full-time attorneys with the OJRC would establish a robust reentry civil legal services program in CCCF, based on the work we have been doing over the past five years. This pilot program would be a collaboration with the Oregon Department of Corrections, CCCF, the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, and several community-based organizations.

Since 2015, OJRC's Women's Justice Project has assisted women, while they are incarcerated, to resolve or learn how to navigate civil legal issues that would likely, after release from prison, be obstacles in their efforts to be successful and contributing members of the community. Just a few examples of the civil legal issues include: family issues, debt, driver's licenses, property, and occupational licenses. It should be noted that the Women's Justice Project grew out of a fellowship that our current attorney and project director, Julia Yoshimoto, secured in 2013.

95% of incarcerated individuals will be released at some point. Statistically, many of those released will return to prison. This is not surprising given the breadth of issues and problems justice-involved individuals face, which are exacerbated by incarceration and collateral

consequences of criminal histories.

The incarcerated women who the OJRC assists with civil legal services enter prison with difficult backgrounds to heal from and overcome, including having histories of trauma, poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness. When released they face a world of overwhelming transition, difficult systems to navigate, numerous demands and requirements, and usually have very little resources and supports.

We have learned in our work that civil legal assistance during incarceration helps women to be better prepared for reentry, to actually address their responsibilities rather than hide from them and puts them on a better path for success.

Research shows that this type of assistance saves the state money and contributes to better public safety outcomes:

- For every dollar invested in civil legal assistance to low-income individuals, the return on investment is \$2-12.
- For every dollar invested in reentry, the state saves as much as \$14.
- Research suggests that money invested on reentry-focused civil legal services for incarcerated people can create a beneficial economic multiplier effect for Oregon and its residents. By encouraging life stability, individuals are able to access benefits and secure employment and housing. This increases local tax revenues and reduces public expenditures.
- For every individual not re-incarcerated in Oregon for a felony, the state avoids *at least* the cost of housing a person in state prison, which is \$39,515 per year. The median length of stay in prison (excluding those sentenced to life, no parole, or death) is 64 months or nearly 5.5 years. Housing someone in state prison for 5.5 years costs at least \$217,332.
  - Through our pilot project (HB 2631), we anticipate providing individual legal services to about 120 women; and engaging with hundreds of other women through group education efforts. If our legal services help just 10 women successfully return to the community, based on the cost of housing a person in state prison and on the average length of stay for incarcerated women (approx. 25 months), the state would avoid spending *at least* \$823,230.
- Civil legal services prevent costly harms to the community. It is more than just a cost saving or fiscal benefit, research shows that access to civil legal services reduces domestic violence rates (many of the women at Coffee Creek are survivors of domestic violence); it helps to keep families together and children out of the foster care system; and it can reduce re-arrest rates.

In short, the research suggests that access to civil legal services for incarcerated individuals can create a profound impact on the women, which would positively benefit the state and its residents.

We envision that the concepts proposed in HB 2631 can lead to further transformative and more holistic support for individuals returning to the community from prison. Women's Justice Project provides more than just a legally-trained problem solver. Prior to law school, Julia Yoshimoto worked in social services with marginalized individuals, primarily low-income women with drug addiction and mental illness. She has her Master of Social Work degree. Her skills and background allow her to provide a more holistic approach to the work. She is equipped to understand and recognize the complexities of a person's circumstances, internal challenges, and motivations, and therefore better able to assess her client's needs. Therefore, the concept we are introducing is not providing only legal services, but rather legal services as an entryway and key component or more holistic reentry preparation. We are currently in exploratory conversations with a number of community-based organizations – medical professionals, faith networks, business owners, program providers – in order to identify ways to leverage our work in ensuring that women are able to access additional supports and services. Many of these organizations are represented as supporters of HB 2631.

Investing in civil legal services for currently incarcerated people will help reduce the risk of recidivism, by decreasing the overwhelming nature of reentry and increasing the chances of stability after release from prison. 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 strongly urge a “yes” to HB 2631. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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