

March 28th 2019

Senator Floyd Prozanski, Chair; Senator Kim Thatcher, Vice-Chair; and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee

My name is Len Norwitz and am testifying as a staff member on behalf of SEIU 503 in support of the four proposals being heard today that focus on rehabilitation for youth in the criminal justice system - SB 966; SB 968; SB 969 and SB 1008.

We have a special stake in this discussion as we represent some 750 or so employees who work at Oregon Youth Authority facilities and are an important part of the Juvenile Justice System. We believe in OYA's mission to make our communities safe and Oregon's youth crime free and productive. OYA protects the public by holding youth accountable and providing a safe environment for evidence-based treatment services, education, and reformation. We are also glad to be helping Oregon move forward on smart reforms and justice reinvestments.

Our members remind us when it comes to youth and kids in the criminal justice system, one size does not fit all. Surely one thread that is consistent is that we need to hold youth accountable, but from there, the issues get very nuanced and murky. And our systems need to be adaptable if we are to adequately serve victims, incarcerated youth, and taxpayers, as well as provide needed resources for prevention programs.

We are supportive of "second look" and the ideas presented in this package of bills. We need to offer incentives for youth to earn the opportunities to reduce their sentence and begin to rebuild their lives in the community. Second look in no way guarantees release. It gives kids a chance to say and show that they deserve another shot. Giving back judicial authority on some Measure 11 crimes will also free up OYA bed space from youth that are ready to go back under supervised transition and help us deal with the many kids who should be coming into our programs every day.

Our members have worked with hundreds of Measure 11 youth. And the tragedy for many of them is that after participating in our programs at OYA and going through the challenges and ups and downs of being held accountable - they are ready to move on - but cannot due to a set sentence and no "second look" or hearing options. They have faced up to the hurts that they have caused; and been trained on de-escalating violence; moderating their emotions and learning basic citizenship skills - things that some were never taught as youngsters. We should be giving them a pathway of controlled supervision back to being productive citizens. But most times we cannot. And we are saddened.

Youth who come to OYA as “DOC commits” don’t have the luxury of sitting around in our facilities waiting to get ready for life in DOC. Our members report that in some cases, after years of us providing opportunities and resources for them to engage in, they prepare for life at DOC - by lifting weights; acting tough and mentally preparing for what some think is the real life in DOC. This is pretty much the exact opposite of how things have worked for them on at OYA. And our workers are despondent about it.

We encourage the Senate Judiciary Committee to move these four proposals forward. We all know the value of forgiveness and second chances. When young people take responsibility for their actions – as they do when with us at the Oregon Youth Authority - they can then make positive contributions to society. Thank you - and let us know if you have any questions on this matter.

Sincerely,

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