

March 28, 2019

The Honorable Floyd Prozanski, Chair
The Honorable Kim Thatcher, Vice-Chair
Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee

RE: Support of youth justice reform, SB 968

Dear Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Althea Seloover and I am the Director of Investigation and Prisoner Support at the Youth Justice Project of the Oregon Justice Resource Center. Our mission is to reduce the criminalization and incarceration of young people. We believe ending excessive sentences and extreme punishments of youth is of the utmost importance to protect young people in the justice system and our wider communities.

I support SB 968 which would eliminate life without parole sentences for youth in Oregon by establishing a process to ensure that anyone convicted of a crime when they were under eighteen years old receives a chance for parole after fifteen years of incarceration.

My job includes working with youthful offenders preparing for parole hearings after twenty-five or more years of incarceration. While many of Oregon's youth who have committed murder or aggravated murder have a possibility to convert their life sentences to a "life with the possibility of parole" sentence through the Board's conversion process, the present parole structure does not make for a "meaningful opportunity for release" for youth. To the contrary, the Board's current structure uses youth as an aggravating factor, often cyclically punishing youth more harshly than adult offenders who have committed the same homicide offenses. While on paper, these youth have an opportunity for release, they are functionally serving life without parole sentences due to the current system.

While SB 968 would make Oregon's parole process a meaningful one for youth, it would not change the rigor and vigilance imbedded in the Parole Board's process. At present, an individual convicted of aggravated murder or murder must go through a three hearing process prior to release into the community that includes a deep interrogation into the development, rehabilitation and remorse of the offender. SB 968 would appropriately frame this interrogation within the context of the offender's particular status, resources, challenges, and circumstances at the time of the offense.

In my professional experience, when given the opportunity, Oregon's youth who have committed the most painful and egregious homicide offenses have an incredible capacity to demonstrate insight into their experiences as youth that made them capable of taking another person's life and deep remorse for their actions. Repeatedly, this insight and remorse has been verified and validated through consistent and mature life choices within Oregon's correctional institutions.

In my experience, an average youth parole client is deeply involved in available treatment programs, volunteer and charitable opportunities, education and vocational development, and positive community activities. Often, my youth clients have eagerly pursued any opportunity for positive development that becomes available within their institution including parenting and marriage classes when the youth is neither a parent or married. The significance and meaning in developing those skills is a demonstration of resilience, creativity, and hope.

Most of my youthful parole clients have very few to no rule violations since entering custody. For those that do, there is a pattern of early rule violations that demonstrate the hallmarks of transient immaturity attempting to process what amounts to a death sentence in the mind of a child. For each of those youth, there came a point where they were able to find value in their lives and hold hope. The power of hope should not be underestimated – a 15 year review hearing would provide a reasonable and actionable target for youth at the very beginning of their development and recovery after causing incredible harm.

The parole process is an appropriate way to consider release for Oregon's youth offenders. Current low release rates for adults and youth offenders alike demonstrate the seriousness with which the Board makes important decisions regarding public safety and pro-social behavior.

As a category, Oregon's youth offenders demonstrate what a community wants in pro-social, civically engaged citizens. Not only are Oregon's youth offenders overwhelmingly committed to their own reformation, they are invested in holding hope for a better system for future generations.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Althea Selover
Director, Investigation & Prisoner Support
Youth Justice Project of the Oregon Justice Resource Center