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TO: House Committee on Judiciary

FR: Jan Elfers, President
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
0245 SW Bancroft Street, Suite B, Portland Oregon 97239

DA: April 24, 2019

RE: Support for SB 1008 and Juvenile Justice Reform

Chair Williamson, Vice-Chair Gorsek, Vice-Chair Sprenger, and
Members of the Committee:

My name is Jan Elfers, and I am writing to share my support for the
reforms to our juvenile justice system in SB 1008.

I am the President of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. Ecumenical
Ministries of Oregon (EMO) is a statewide association of Christian
denominations, congregations, ecumenical organizations and
interfaith partners working together to improve the lives of Oregonians
through community ministry programs, ecumenical and inter-religious
dialogue, public policy advocacy and climate justice work.

As people of faith, we care about future generations. We know that the
ways we treat children and youth have lifelong impacts, on them and on
society. And we believe that as adults, we have a responsibility to help
set our youngest neighbors on a path to become thriving, contributing
members of our community. That responsibility may be hardest for
youth who commit crimes, but it is our responsibility nonetheless.

Oregonians want to prevent crime and rehabilitate youth who commit
crimes. Unfortunately, our current justice system does not respond to
youth crimes in a way that creates opportunities for a better future.
That's why the reforms in SB 1008 are so important.

We are saddened whenever any of our youth make harmful choices, and
we believe accountability is needed. But we do not believe that
punishments that may fit adults are developmentally appropriate for
youth.

We must understand the full context of what led a young person to their
crimes, to know how to turn them toward a better path. This is the
valuable insight that a judge can bring, in providing a 'second look' at
youths' cases halfway through their sentence and when youth are not
automatically waived to adult courts.

Youth sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole have
no chance to rewrite their life story toward the path of redemption.
Young adults who are transferred to adult institutions without a hearing
before a judge are consigned to an even greater punishment than the
adults they are housed with, because they are immediate targets for
violence and recruitment. The paths we send these young people on do
not make our society better, any more than they rehabilitate the
individuals' lives.

SB 1008 makes significant progress towards helping our juvenile justice system be more humane and achieve what we want it to: accountability that keeps young people safe and turns their lives onto a productive, healing path. This is something we can join together on across party lines and religious backgrounds, because it is the right thing to do for our youth.

Faith communities understand that our responsibilities to the youngest members of our society are not interrupted by criminal records. Our commitment to respect for each person's dignity matters most to those who are vulnerable, especially youth in our justice system.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I ask your support for SB 1008, and I urge the Committee to move this bill forward.