



4110 SE Hawthorne Boulevard #503 | Portland, Oregon 97214
Admin (503) 222-6507 | Hotline (503) 222-6222 | Fax (503) 222-4754
We believe that everyone deserves to live a life free from violence.

RE: SB 566

Dear Senator Prozanski,

My name is Samantha Cohen, and I am writing to you in my capacity as a Prevention Education Specialist with Raphael House of Portland in support of Senate Bill 566 – to remove the language “mentally defective” from statutes defining sexual offenses.

As both as an educator and as an advocate serving survivors of domestic and sexual violence, I have had the honor of teaching young adults who experience intellectual and developmental disabilities the importance of practicing consent and providing tools to navigate safe relationships. It pains me to see the dehumanizing language of “mentally defective,” a linguistic relic of times where exclusion, rather than inclusion, was the norm when it came to allowing people with disabilities to be members of their communities.

Emotionality aside, the language in the law, while not intended to guide processes such as individualized support planning, has had the unfortunate consequence of providers, educators, and other service planning staff feeling ill equipped to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as they navigate sexuality and providing and obtaining consent. Among this group, there is also concern around liability if they were to engage in skill building around practicing and obtaining consent for sexual encounters.

This is problematic for two reasons: Firstly, this avoidance places people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at a higher risk of experiencing domestic and sexual violence as they are not given the tools to identify signs of abusive and exploitative behavior in their relationships. Secondly, this avoidance to engage around this matter denies people with intellectual and developmental disabilities the right to practice self-determination in their relationships and sexuality.

It is my hope that you support the changes proposed in SB 566 as it not only removes a painful mark of normalized ableism, but it also guides prosecutors to advocate for survivors with intellectual and developmental disabilities with more clarity.

With Respect,
Samantha Cohen
Prevention Education Specialist
Raphael House of Portland
scohen@raphaelhouse.com