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TESTIMONY ON SB 835

Good morning, Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee. My name is Autumn Billings, and I represent the American Conservative Union Foundation where I serve as Assistant General Counsel. Thank you for holding this important hearing. I hope my testimony today is helpful to this committee in providing essential information regarding Senate Bill 835.

At ACUF, we strongly support evidence-based policies that not only promote and protect human dignity, but also ensure community safety and that taxpayer dollars are used wisely. This is why we support policies that expand compassionate release eligibility to individuals who no longer pose a public safety threat. Establishing a clear and timely process for which sick and elderly inmates can request early medical release is a sensible approach to tackling pressing concerns born out of the misguided tough-on-crime policies of the past.

Unfortunately, as it stands, the compassionate release system in Oregon is confusing to navigate, slow to respond, and therefore underutilized. What's more, complex and vague requirements put officials in a needlessly difficult position when determining eligibility. As conservatives, we back the policies underlying Senate Bill 835 that would implement measures to require adults in custody to show a well-defined, exceptional need for medical release. It is critical, however, that



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compassionate release is not available to those who pose a threat to their community. And, of course, decisions must be made in a timely manner. By supporting such policies, Oregon can begin to relieve the strain on the prison system while upholding the principles of human dignity, government accountability, and public safety.

Some will argue that their budgets and workload will increase and that such an increase is somehow related to a bad policy decision on your part. But it is incumbent upon lawmakers to make wise decisions on the taxpayer's behalf that result in the public's net-benefit. One department's increased budget is not the end of analysis. Prison cells are expensive. Although the proposals outlined in Senate Bill 835 may marginally increase the Department of Parole's costs, they will have a corresponding net-benefit to the Department of Corrections that should more than off-set the increased revenue needs of the parole office.

It is important to realize that when taken as a whole, sensible compassionate release programs drive costs [down](#) overall. It's a fact of life that as we age we require additional healthcare. The same holds true, often more so, for incarcerated individuals. As noted by the Department of Justice, the cost of incarcerating an elderly inmate can cost [2-3 times more](#) than housing younger inmates. Currently, healthcare costs are the second highest expenditure in the Oregon DOC's budget and will only continue to rise along with the age of the incarcerated population unless action is taken.



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We can all agree that the costs of incarceration are worth it if that spending translates into improved public safety. However, that is not always the case in the context of incarcerating the elderly.

Decades of data shows that individuals “age-out” of crime. In fact, those over the age of 50 re-offend at a far [lower rate](#) than younger offenders. And although each case is different, this evidence simply cannot be ignored when considering that vast amounts of public resources that go into funding the system. We must all strive to make sure that our tax dollars are being used intelligently. Prisons are for people we are afraid of, not merely mad at. We simply cannot afford for our prisons to be relegated to highly secured nursing homes when doing so clearly does not translate to public safety. The cost to both our finances and our communities would just be too great and unfair to our taxpayers.

Safely utilizing compassionate release is not a new concept and was developed in large part by the Trump Administration during the passage of the bipartisan *First Step Act*.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Committee, for your consideration of the views of the American Conservative Union Foundation. I encourage you all to visit our website, conservativejusticereform.org, for more information regarding our views on the principles underlying Senate Bill 835. Thank you.