

Testimony
Dion
SB 819
March 31, 2021

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments or your consideration today. It has been a long journey for me to get where I am today, a young man with a strong self-esteem, a strong sense of community, and a deep commitment to helping others. I am not the same teenager I was over five years ago when I was sentenced by the court, and everyone I know in the MacLaren community constantly reminds me of this.

When I was 3 or 4 years old, my dad took me and my brother away from my mom. After he got re-married, I remember things getting bad. I was subject to a lot of physical and emotional abuse in addition to isolation from friends and other family. The other thing that I dealt with while living with my stepmom, is that after she began having kids, she made me parent all of my new baby siblings. When I was 15, I ran away to live with my mom back in Oregon. Initially, living with my mom was great. There was no abuse and I felt loved and supported. I, for once, had reasonable responsibilities and finally got to just be a big brother and a teenager. After about a year, however, my childhood really caught up to me, and I lost myself. I started to act like my father, I was abrasive, cocky and ignorant. I wouldn't let anyone tell me anything, set any limits, or assert any boundaries. This led to me living with my grandparents where I felt wasn't wanted and had no supervision.

Desperate to find a place where I fit in, I looked for belonging wherever I could find it, and it wasn't long before I began to make unhealthy associations with people who didn't have my best interests at heart. It is those bad decisions that led me to committing the crimes I am incarcerated for. I got a gun and twice I used Facebook to trick people into meeting me so that I could buy their sneakers. At the meet up, me and my "friends," (I now know that these were not true friends), flashed a gun and stole the sneakers. I also did this once to steal money and marijuana from one of the drug dealers at my high school.

In each of these instances someone reported my crime to the police and identified me. The police then picked me up while I was wearing the shoes I had stolen. I was charged with 33 different charges and pled guilty to three counts of Robbery and took a 90-month sentence. I am now 23 and have been in custody five and a half years. I will be at MacLaren until August 2022 then transfer "upstate" to DOC custody to serve the final four months and five days of my sentence in adult prison.

My transition into custody was, like many of my peers, difficult. I was frustrated and angry, I was hurt and confused, and I needed help. I ended up spending a lot of time in the

“chair”—which is essentially a chair set away from peers and community where I had to sit with myself and my thoughts. While there I began to spend a lot of time talking to staff, in these conversations I learned about what I needed to change, how to find inner strength, and where to turn for help. So many of the bad decisions I made early on were because I didn’t understand that my anger was a symptom of my sadness, and that I had to stop doing things because I wanted other people to like me. I had to learn to value myself. Now, more than 5 years later, I see myself as a leader, independent, loving, humble, funny, caring, and helpful—and I am not ashamed of being those things, I am proud of them.

When I really began to participate in the programs and therapy OYA offered to me, things began to fall into place. Since starting my time in custody, I have had many accomplishments including: graduating high school, getting my barber license, getting my personal training certificate, getting my food handlers license, training 15 dogs with Project Pooch, winning numerous basketball games and perhaps my biggest accomplishment, being a live-in mentor on the MacLaren unit for youth with complex trauma.

At MacLaren, being a mentor is something between being a big brother and a junior staff—you lead both by example and by intervening with youth to help them think through what is going on, talk out their issues, and make better smarter choices in moments when they want to explode, hurt themselves, hurt others, or just do something stupid. The youth on the unit where I mentor have faced horrible abuse or other trauma before entering the justice system. From day one in this role, I was learning my own boundaries, and working on effective communication, while helping peers deescalate and supporting their positive behaviors. My first six months were hard, really hard. I even had to take a break, regroup, and try again, because working with youth with complex trauma was triggering to me and I need to get my own self in order before I could help them. But even when it was hard, I wanted to stick with it because I liked that I was helping other youth and that I was a part of something good

Being a mentor has helped me realize that we all have problems, and sometimes make mistakes—even big mistakes that harm others—but we all also sometimes need help and it is okay to need help in order to grow. It takes bravery to ask for help, it takes bravery to take accountability and it takes bravery to apologize. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about the people I scared and hurt when I committed my crimes. I feel ashamed and embarrassed for what I did. I even feel like I was a bad person for making these choices. I have had to work long and hard on these feelings in my time here at MacLaren. I want to take accountability for what I have done, but even more I want to apologize to the people I hurt. I don’t expect them to forgive me, I just want them to know I am truly sorry for the wrongs I have done. Being a mentor has helped me start to make doing the right thing a real habit. I am no longer taking from people. Instead, I am giving—and that for me is a part of my growth and essential to me taking accountability.

Now I want to be able to give back to the larger community, I want to take the skills I have learned at MacLaren and apply them in the real world, I want to be a nurse. But, I still have almost two more years at MacLaren and then four months “up state” before I can start that journey.

OYA and its programs have worked for me, I have grown into an accomplished adult, but there is no mechanism right now, except clemency, for the people who charged me with my crime and sentenced me to see how I have changed and understand all that I can give back to my community. If I have learned one thing as a mentor, it is that we are all individuals with individual stories and the only way I can successfully work with each of the youth I work is to take them as individuals. I wish the system could also see me as the individual I am.

The bill in front of you today, SB 819, would allow me and the district attorney to jointly petition the court that sentenced me to request that they, in light of who I am as an individual and who I have become over the last 5 years, reconsider my conviction and sentence. I think in cases like mine where someone has dedicated themselves to change, taken advantage of all that OYA has to offer, and truly rehabilitated this law will make all of the difference.

I know that this bill won't apply to me, but I am here for others like me in the future.

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee, I urge you to pass SB 819.