



PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY & JUSTICE

Submitted to the Senate Committee on Judiciary
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Testimony in Support of SB 207
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Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher and Members of the Committee,

At Partnership for Safety & Justice, we advocate for public safety and criminal justice policies that ensure accountability, equity, and healing for people convicted of crime, crime survivors, and the families and communities of both. For over 20 years, our work has promoted public safety with policies that keep families together, reduce racial disparities, and invest in communities across Oregon.

We support SB 207 and the creation of an Ombudsman for the Department of Corrections (DOC). An Ombudsman with the Department of Corrections would improve public safety by helping to increase access to mental health supports in prisons, address racial disparities in our system, and care for our community members who are incarcerated so that they are most successful when transitioning home.

An ombudsman can bring a needed level of transparency and care to a vast and complex system that has over 12,000 men and women in 14 prisons spread across the state, releases nearly 500 people a month, and has a staff with backgrounds in policing more than rehabilitation.

As one of, if not the biggest, provider of mental health care in the state, the men and women serving prison sentences need added protections and avenues for self-advocacy during their time incarcerated that the Ombudsman can facilitate.

Further, recent data collected by the DOC shows massive racial disparities between correctional staff and the men and women who are incarcerated in Oregon's prisons. The racial and cultural disparities need to be brought to light and their impacts reported through a system that doesn't risk retaliation to the person reporting.

Importantly, the vast majority of people will return home from prison and as DOC director Collette Peters said in a recent interview:

*"I think it's important for people to understand that while we have engaged in mass incarceration, these are our community members. These are our brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles who have been incarcerated. **And over 95 percent of them are coming back to our communities.** And do you want them coming back, having felt cared for during the midst of a pandemic or not? **I know what kind of neighbor I want. I want one that feels like they were cared for, both***

*from a public safety perspective and a public health perspective during their incarceration.”*¹

Ombudsman can help create the culture change that we need to both reduce who is in our prison and the conditions of their confinement. This is important not just for those that are incarcerated and their loved ones, but also for our communities and victims of crime.

A national survey of victims of crimes found that “by a 2 to 1 margin, victims prefer that the criminal justice system focus more on rehabilitating people who commit crimes than punishing them,” and “**by a margin of nearly 3 to 1, victims believe that prison makes people more likely to commit crimes than to rehabilitate them.**”²

In addition to needing to shrink the number of people in our prison, Oregon is overdue to change the culture in our prisons and an Ombudsman can help provide oversight, transparency and guidance needed to do so.

The ombudsman position is one that could significantly improve the care, support, and transparency of the prison system and bring it in line with Oregonians’ values of equity, healing, and accountability. We urge your support for SB 207.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/prisons-jails-are-covid-19-hotspots-is-vaccinating-inmates-a-priority>

² <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Crime-Survivors-Speak-Report-1.pdf> (p.5)