

May 13th, 2021
House Committee on Judiciary
Re: Support for SJR 10

Chair Bynum, Vice Chairs Noble and Power, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing today to urge you to support SJR 10, which would amend the Oregon Constitution to remove the antiquated language of slavery from its pages.

Currently, Article 1, Section 34 of our State Constitution reads, "There shall be neither slavery, nor involuntary servitude in the State, otherwise than as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Frankly, it is repugnant that the State of Oregon still explicitly justifies the classification of any certain people as slaves, and to think we can maintain this language in our Constitution and still claim to uphold tenets of freedom or democracy is delusional. Your support of SJR 10 and the subsequent removal of this exception clause from the Oregon Constitution would finally abolish constitutionally permitted slavery in our state, as is our moral imperative.

This language is abhorrent for many reasons beyond the strictly moral. Our sentencing laws denote specific consequences for the conviction of certain crimes, however state-sanctioned dehumanization of incarcerated individuals should not be one of them. Stripping people of their dignity, as this language does, inherently condones the continued abuse of a powerless population and maintains historic racist practice by disproportionately effecting Oregonians of color, who already live with the generational trauma and long-term ramifications of slavery. Additionally, it incentivizes the poisonous for-profit prison system that make the rich even richer off the backs of the poor, and feeds into the endless cycle of mass incarceration in Oregon. We cannot start to get serious about what 'rehabilitation' and a 'just criminal justice' system actually look like in our state, if we are still justifying the enslavement of incarcerated people.

At the end of the day, while there are plenty of economic and technical arguments to be made in support of this amendment, I ultimately appeal to your humanity - the humanity that our State Constitution currently explicitly denies incarcerated Oregonians. No child should have to grow up knowing their parent is legally classified as a slave, while elsewhere in the State, the child of a government committee member is told by their parent that "slavery is okay sometimes". It is not okay, ever, and this is your chance to affirm it.

I urge this Committee to vote yes on SJR 10, as introduced; I urge you to be on the right side of history and ensure that slavery is truly a thing of the past.

In solidarity,
Samantha Parsons