



February 24, 2021

To: Senate Committee On Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation

From: Zach Winston, Policy Director

Re: **Testimony in Support of SB 571**

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee,

The goal of the Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC) is to promote civil rights and improve legal representation for communities that have often been underserved in the past: people living in poverty and people of color among them. We work in collaboration with like-minded organizations to maximize our reach to serve underrepresented populations, to train future public interest lawyers, and to educate our community on issues related to civil rights and civil liberties.

Currently, Oregonians incarcerated for felony convictions are unable to vote. Once released from incarceration they must re-register. SB 571 would allow incarcerated people to vote in the county of their last voluntary residence. The bill also provides that incarcerated individuals can register to vote and should receive election materials, such as the Voters Pamphlet and ballots, in prison.

To fully grasp the importance of SB 571, one must understand how we arrived at this moment. As with so many issues in the United States and Oregon, oppression and fear has shaped the policy and framing around disenfranchisement of incarcerated people. A law written about 160 years ago, during a time of forced labor, exclusion laws, lashings, lynching and policies designed solely to benefit white men and oppress people of color, still forbids incarcerated Oregonians from being valued as human beings in this state.

Arguments in favor of felony disenfranchisement hinge upon the belief that people convicted of felonies should lose their rights, a pervasive discourse that has been perpetuated by politicians across party lines. In reality, the detrimental impacts that this policy has on Black, Indigenous and communities of color dates back to the racist Jim Crow-era policies. As a result, people of color, specifically Black and Indigenous people, are overrepresented in prisons and are therefore disenfranchised at higher rates than white people. Restoring voting rights for incarcerated people is a necessary step towards dismantling racist policies, and would acknowledge the complex root causes of crime, subverting the dominant discourse that people who commit crimes deserve to lose their right to vote.

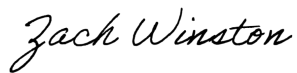
95% of currently incarcerated individuals will be released back into the community. Preparation for a successful reentry to the community begins well before release, and participating in an important aspect of being a “good citizen” is a way to get ready for release and maintain community bonds. Oregon has the chance to take a historic step toward justice and equity in our state by becoming the third state in the nation to extend the right to vote to people currently incarcerated for felony convictions.

There is an urgent need for progress in our democracy that integrates an evolving sense of decency into policies in order to move Oregon past archaic and prejudiced practices to recognize the inherent value of incarcerated Oregonians. There is tremendous power in feeling like part of a community that values its member.

Oregon must embrace the opportunity to lead on this issue because in recognizing the humanity of our fellow human beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.

We strongly urge you to support SB 571.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zach Winston".

Zach Winston  
Policy Director  
Oregon Justice Resource Center