

To: Oregon Senate Education Committee

From: Robert Northman, PSU undergrad, Freed Minds student group, HEP Steering Committee member, formerly incarcerated person

**RE: Letter in Support of Access to Technology for Prisoners Engaged in the Pursuit of Higher Education**

Date: February 1, 2022

Dear Honorable Members of the Oregon Senate Education Committee—

I humbly reach out to the members of this Committee as a citizen and a student with an intersecting background that includes being formerly incarcerated.

I want to begin by thanking this committee for being committed to helping prisoners and formerly incarcerated persons access higher education in and after prison. I truly believe this kind of support will empower a vulnerable population to succeed in rebuilding lives free from the cycle of recidivism that I was once trapped in myself.

For the past two years, I have followed this committee's work and I am personally grateful for everything it has done with respect to banning the felony-question box on university admissions applications (SB 713) and the equitable roll-out of the Pell grant in Oregon's Department of Corrections (SB 234). I testified in support of both of those bills, and I also participated in the Higher Education Coordinating Commission's Corrections Education (SB 234) Work Group that promulgated the report and recommendations recently sent back to the Oregon Legislature.

I have been to prison on three different occasions and each time, upon my release, I found myself left behind with respect to technology. This was especially so when I completed my longest sentence of almost seven years. As technology has made its rapid advances over the years, many people just like me have sat in prison and simply wondered and guessed what the internet was, what it did, and how it was used. Some of us, if interested enough could read about it if we had the extra money to order books or magazines about it, but generally, technological knowledge, like so much other knowledge, has been seen by prison officials as *threatening the safety & security of the institution*. See, in prison, the more you *know*, apparently the more of a threat you pose.

When I was in prison here in Oregon, the only thing we could access a computer for was to use a word processor and that use was restricted to preparing legal materials in relation to a checked-and-verified court case and then that use was also only under strict supervision. There was absolutely no access allowed to the internet.

As a result of this hindrance of learning, upon my first and second releases, I found myself in a technologically hyper-advanced world that I was severely underprepared for. Even as far as the

aforementioned minimal access to a word processor, in 2004, the ODOC's Snake River law library was operating a 1997 version of MS Word. I did not know how to use the internet whatsoever. I knew not the terms or concepts used to navigate technological systems, and once released, I was left on my own to acquire these lessons while also expected to find full-time employment in a job market that had turned to mostly online applications within constantly changing web-based systems.

I turned to school to fill in this lapse in knowledge, but school takes time and recently being released from prison, I had more important voids in terms of basic needs and so the search to fill the needs of housing, transportation, clothing, identification, communication, and more, easily became overwhelming for me when I did not possess the knowledge to acquire these needs, let alone some fancy goals of going to school. Without one's basic needs being met, school becomes a distant possibility, and the educational handicap remains. In the short run of things, I had needs which required expense, and without funds to cover these expenses, I simply gave up on the State's plan for me, and went back to what I *did* know, which was selling drugs and otherwise committing crime to survive. I didn't have to learn anything new to do what I already knew how to do.

Before I began work toward any college degree, I had to learn how to use computers, including related concepts and terms, programs, and applications. This required me to complete non-credit classes at Portland Community College. It all sounds pretty easy and simple, right? However, I had to do this under duress as I was: being regularly stopped by police so they could search my person and vehicle; being required to travel across town to visit a parole officer on a weekly basis; having my home randomly and invasively searched on a regular basis; living in poverty with a background that made me a target of violence; assimilating with a society unlike that of convicts; trying to rebuild estranged relationships with family, including my children; and not having any social support whatsoever.

The arbitrary ban on technology in prison is very mundane and medieval. I do not believe that knowledge is a threat to institutional safety and security, and I believe the ODOC exaggerates much of what they claim, to create and perpetuate an atmosphere of ignorance and stupidity. The world is changing at a very rapid pace and by prohibiting prisoners from accessing everyday technology they will be expected to know how to use by society, employers, and even government entities, prisoners are being neglected and purposely set up to return to prison in the future.

I ask that the Senate Education Committee see past unsupported claims made by the ODOC and weigh whether censorship and bans on technology and knowledge serve to harm the prisoner population upon release versus keeping prisoners *dumbed down* when the vast majority of prisoners will ultimately be released into the community someday.

Thank you all for allowing me to share with you my thoughts and opinions and I hope they assist you in your deliberations on this matter.