



Date: January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
To: Senate Committee on Judiciary  
From: Jennifer Parrish Taylor, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy  
RE: Support Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary,

My name is Jennifer Parrish Taylor, and I am with the Urban League of Portland. We are one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington. We are part of a broad coalition that has the support of over 40 civil rights organizations, faith-based groups, as well as dozens of currently and formerly incarcerated people. I am writing to testify in strong support for Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579, which will ensure every eligible Oregonian can register to vote, update their voter registration, and vote in elections based on where they resided prior to incarceration.

The right to vote is enshrined in our constitution and fundamental to a vibrant and participatory democracy. Yet around 12,000 people in Oregon are currently denied their right to vote, leading to low-income, Black, Indigenous, and Latine people being disproportionately disenfranchised. Due to biases and inequities in our criminal legal system, low-income, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are more likely to be incarcerated. For many people, life after prison only means partial citizenship, as formerly incarcerated people often experience limited opportunities for employment, housing, and voting. As we work to reimagine our criminal legal system, one of the first changes we can make is to restore voting rights to people who are most impacted by that system, inside and outside prisons.

According to the Equal Justice Initiative, "the United States incarcerates its citizens more than any other country. Mass incarceration disproportionately impacts the poor and people of color and does not make us safer." Incarceration is used as a tool to permanently punish Oregonians on the one hand but asks of those who are incarcerated, to reform themselves on the other. If those who are incarcerated are to truly reform, civic engagement must be one tool that they can access; being able to cast a vote, especially for Black communities, has been part and parcel of the social contract we made with America post slavery into reconstruction and post the Jim Crow era. Blocking people with felony convictions from voting started in the Jim Crow era as an intentional strategy to keep Black people from voting because we are disproportionately impacted by the biased criminal legal system. In Oregon, 9% of incarcerated people are Black, despite Black people accounting for only 2% of the state's residents. Guaranteeing the right to vote, including those who are or have been incarcerated, ensures all people have a voice in our democracy.

Research suggests that restoring voting rights to people impacted by the criminal legal system could aid their transition back into community life. In one study, among individuals who had been arrested previously, 27% of non-voters were rearrested, compared with 12% of voters. More than 95% of incarcerated people will re-enter society after completing their sentence and work jobs, raise families, and pay taxes in their communities. Making sure Oregonians can vote while incarcerated allows them to feel involved in their communities and increases the success of reintegration when they come back. Voting also allows incarcerated people to advocate for their children and loved ones who remain in their communities. Mass incarceration damages our communities. It divides families, harms children, and diverts



resources away from other community needs. To reverse that harm, we need to keep people from re-entering the criminal legal system. We know that civic engagement reduces the likelihood that someone returns to prison again because they feel connected to their community. By restoring voting rights to incarcerated people, we reduce recidivism and make our society stronger.

It is in everyone's interest that those released from incarceration become successfully integrated into our communities. Many studies have shown that establishing social bonds in one's community highly increases the chances of successful re-entry, greatly reducing the number of people returning to prison, and improves public safety for all—that includes ensuring people can support themselves and their families through work and can become engaged and active in their communities. Guaranteeing the right to vote for all Oregonians, including those who are incarcerated, keeps people involved in their communities and makes our communities safer.

Voting is a right that cannot and should not be taken away from any citizen of the U.S. No matter your race, area code, or income, every Oregonian should have an equal say in what happens in our country and our community. Denying Oregonians the ability to vote not only denies them a right, but it denies them the ability to fulfill their civic responsibility to our democracy. Our constitution guarantees free elections, equal protection under the law, and freedom of speech. Voting is also fundamental to our rights and freedom as Oregonians. Everyone, including people who are incarcerated, should have access to the ballot box so they can have a say in the decisions that impact their lives. Legislation is best shaped by directly impacted people - Guaranteeing the Right to Vote emerged from community conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated people about the importance of voting and civic responsibility. Guaranteeing the Right to Vote fulfills the promise of our democracy while improving public safety and addressing racial and socioeconomic inequities. As a representative of the Urban League of Portland, we ask that you please support SB 579 and pass it out of committee.

Thank you,

Jennifer Parrish Taylor  
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