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January 28, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Judiciary

From: Heather Busby, Executive Director

Re: **Support Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579**

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

Founded in 1975, Youth, Rights & Justice is Oregon's only non-profit juvenile public defense firm. Each year, we provide holistic, client-centered representation to around 1000 children, youth, and parents in Oregon's juvenile court system. Additionally, we provide educational advocacy so children can attend, graduate, and succeed in school and early defense advocacy to keep families together. In 2021, we launched our expunction clinic for individuals with juvenile records.

A disproportionate number of YRJ's clients are Black, Indigenous and People of Color. Through our advocacy for Oregon's children, youth, and parents, we often see the same systemic problems and we work to change the policies that contribute to these problems.

### **YRJ Supports SB 579.**

Guaranteeing the right to vote is a matter of equity. Because of mass incarceration, low income, Black, Indigenous, and communities of color are disproportionately denied the right to vote.

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, those inside prisons.

Blocking people with felony convictions from voting started in the Jim Crow era as an intentional strategy to keep Black people from voting because they 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.<sup>1</sup> Guaranteeing the right to vote, including those who are or have been incarcerated, ensures all people have a voice in our democracy.

People in prison face issues unique to their incarceration that often go unaddressed by public officials. COVID-19 illustrated the unique issues that people in prison can face. In October, The Oregonian reported that COVID-19 cases were 10 times higher in Oregon prisons than in the state broadly.

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 Youth, Rights & Justice we ask that you please support SB 579 and pass it out of committee.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'HB' or similar initials, written in a cursive style.

Heather Busby (she/her)  
Executive Director

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-oregon.pdf>