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TAX ID # 93-0639815

To: Members of the Senate Committee On Judiciary

From: Sponsors, Inc.

Submitted by Paul Solomon, Co-Executive Director

Date: March 2, 2023

Re: Support for SB 697 & SB 698

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

I write to you today in support of SB 697 & 698.

Since 1973, from our base in Lane County, Sponsors, Inc., has been a national leader in the delivery of prisoner reentry services. We offer a broad range of services—case management, employment assistance, housing, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, mental health services and mentoring—that people need in order to be successful upon returning to their community.

Our philosophy is based on the belief that people can and do change, and that a strategic intervention at the appropriate moment can serve as a catalyst in that change. Every year, our organization helps over 500 people re-enter our community to become productive, law-abiding, hardworking and tax-paying citizens. I, myself, have had the experience of involvement with the criminal legal system and can attest to the challenges that those with a criminal conviction face.

Any record—no matter how old or minor—can put employment, housing, education, good credit and more permanently out of reach. Studies show that a criminal record reduces a job seeker's chance of even getting a callback or job offer by nearly 50 percent¹ and formerly incarcerated people are nearly 10 times more likely than the general

¹ Devah Pager, Bruce Western, and Naomi Sugie, "Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 623 (1) (2009): 195–213.



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public to experience homelessness.² This is an issue that has generational impacts for families. We should be looking to SB 697 and SB 698 as a solution to ensure that justice involved individuals who have earned the right, are able to expunge their criminal record. The opportunity for redemption and rehabilitation are powerful motivators and serve as critical counterweights to hopelessness and desperation that can lead to the commission of additional crimes.

We have a process to petition for record clearance once an individual has successfully met the terms and conditions of sentencing and eligibility requirements. However, the complexity of the process has put us in a situation where less than 10% of eligible Oregonians are successful in having their records cleared. Though SB 397 (2021) modernized our current petition based systems, there are not enough free legal services to help people file and most lack the means to hire an attorney with necessary expertise in this area. This barrier impacts literally hundreds of thousands of Oregonians and their families. SB 697 and SB 698 represent a critical investment in making government more responsive, to reinforcing our commitment to equal justice under the law, to reinforce public safety and to unleash untapped potential in our workforce.

By automatically sealing or expunging qualifying records for people who remain crime-free for a set period of time, SB 698 will ensure that Oregonians get the second chance that they have earned while taking the burden of filing a court petition off the individual and lessening strain on the courts.

We know, through practice and research, that people who are on a positive path toward re-engaging in their communities and with their support networks have very low rates of recidivism. SB 698,

² Lucius Couloute, "Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people" (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018), available at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.



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simply by automating a process long overdue for modernization, will help put tens-of-thousands of Oregonians on that positive path. Please pass SB 698.

I recognize that the concept of automation is new to Oregon but it is not new as other several other states have passed and begun implementing similar legislation. As a coalition, we also recognize that stakeholders have raised some legitimate technical questions that merit further consideration and notification concerns from victim's rights advocates. We have taken these seriously and they are reflected in amendments to both SB 697 and SB 698.

In closing, it is customary to want to pump the breaks when asking government to change longstanding, well established procedures. There is a certain comfort in that for stakeholders even if that system fails to meet the needs of some 93% of Oregonians eligible for expungement. However, when you work every day like Sponsors does and many other organizations in this coalition do, to build trust and confidence with clients who seek to rebuild their lives and to instill hope that our system of justice supports the opportunity for a better future and not just perpetual punishment, there is no doubt this is a worthy investment in a better Oregon.

The appropriate question is not whether these reforms are needed now, but instead are we making progress quickly enough? Finally, it is important to make clear, automation does not in any way change which crimes are eligible for expungement. At the end of the day, what we are really talking about is an administrative change that shifts the burden for record clearance from the justice involved individual to the state once all terms of eligibility are met.

Thank you for your time today and consideration of this vital legislation.