



Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 1560. I am a state policy manager for the Justice Action Network (JAN), the nation's largest bipartisan criminal justice reform organization. JAN works in states across the country to support lawmakers enacting bipartisan, data-driven justice reform laws that make communities safer.

JAN has supported Sen. Dembrow's leadership on this bill for years. For the past two legislative sessions, policy based on careful, evidence-based process led by Sen. Michael Dembrow and Rep. Lisa Reynolds and driven by system stakeholders passed through this committee. While we are disappointed that those bills did not advance, we will continue to support any future efforts to forge ahead, including any proposed amendments to SB 1560 that would establish a task force to study the issue.

Instituting a system of medically-informed compassionate release is a urgently necessary reform for Oregon. **Releasing from prison older people facing severe medical challenges is the humane and morally correct thing to do. But the evidence is also clear that it can be done safely without endangering the public.**

Research shows these individuals are less likely to reoffend post-release than younger people. Nationally, figures show that the recidivism rate for individuals 50 years old and above is 15%; for applicants released through compassionate medical release, the rate is 3.5%.

To be clear, Oregon already has a procedure for releasing people at the end of their lives. But that procedure is broken. Over much of the last decade, from 2013 to 2020, just nine people were released through the early medical release process. 11 people died while awaiting either an assessment, a decision, or their release from prison.

There is a huge fiscal cost to keeping behind bars people are certain to die. The open tab for these medical costs swallows an enormous amount of DOC's budget. Imagine if the savings from keeping people in prison under these conditions were redirected to vocational programs, which dramatically reduce recidivism by helping people find good paying jobs after release?

This should be a bipartisan issue. We see lawmakers of all political stripes leading the way toward a fairer, more humane—and yes, cost-effective—justice system through compassionate release bills like the one before you today. As the American Conservative Union Foundation wrote in a statement supporting similar reform to the federal system: *“All human beings have inherent dignity and value. Even those who have been convicted and incarcerated for crimes have dignity; unfortunately, our criminal justice system continually fails to recognize this. Prisoners sentenced years and sometimes decades ago under the wave of draconian sentencing of the past have turned our prisons into highly secure nursing homes.”*ⁱ

SB 1560 provides the chance for Oregon to act with compassion, guided by medical and public health expertise. JAN urges the swift passage of this important legislation. If we can assist members of the committee in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me at noah@justiceactionnetwork.org.

Sincerely,

Noah Bein
State Policy Manager
Justice Action Network

ⁱ <https://conservativejusticereform.org/issue/elderly-in-prison-and-compassionate-release/>