



## Legislative Testimony

### OREGON DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

February 18, 2025

The Honorable Zach Hudson, Chair  
House Committee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

**Subject: House Bill 2747**

Chair Hudson and members of the committee, my name is Larry Bennett, and I serve as Assistant Director of the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) Correctional Services Division. I am providing neutral testimony on House Bill (HB) 2747.

**What the Bill Does:**

HB 2747 would expand DOC's adult in custody online education from the two pilot sites funded by SB 1522 (2022) to include the remaining 10 DOC institutions. It also requires DOC to have these services in place by September 1, 2026.

**Background:**

With the pending arrival of Pell Grant eligibility for individuals in custody effective July 2023, members of the Oregon legislature worked with DOC and its higher education partners to introduce and pass Senate Bill 1522 (2022), which required DOC establish online education access at two pilot institutions, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF) and Snake River Correctional Institution (SRCI).

Several challenges were encountered along the way to providing these services. The two most significant were the work of retrofitting institutions constructed of concrete and steel to accommodate secure internet connectivity and Wi-Fi access, and the lengthy and cumbersome US Department of Education (USDOE) process for our college and university partners to gain approval to provide Pell grant education services within DOC institutions. Though the federal Pell grant prison education approval process remains laborious, time-consuming, and outside of DOC control, after a year of hard work and ingenuity DOC was able to establish stable access to the necessary IT services required for online education to commence at the two pilot institutions. Through effective communication and partnership with our higher education partners throughout the state, DOC met the SB1522-imposed deadline of September 2023.

Today, DOC's internal processes and associated partnerships related to this work function like a well-oiled machine. Oregon is well ahead of most states, and DOC is frequently contacted as a resource for other states. In addition, the experience garnered by our IT and Physical Plant teams has equipped DOC with the knowledge and experience needed to address the inherent difficulties of developing the infrastructure needed to create Wi-Fi access within the unique environment and requirements of prison facilities, as well as the art of whitelisting education

websites and providing secure access to partner college and university Learning Management Systems (LMSs).

Despite challenges associated with the federal application and accreditation process, many of our college and university partners have persevered as well. To date, the following schools have embarked on the process:

- **Central Oregon Community College** (the fourth in the nation and first in Oregon to become PELL certified) and **Portland State University** have completed the entire process and have been approved by USDOE.
- Two community colleges, **Chemeketa Community College** and **Treasure Valley Community College** were previously approved as Second Chance Pell grant programs before the July 2023 return of the Pell grant, so they are currently grandfathered in and able to continue to offer Pell grant-funded education programs. However, the allowance is temporary, so they have reapplied under the new process. They are both at the second stage awaiting the accreditor's approval, after which they will be able to move to the final stage, submitting their official application to the U.S. Department of Education.
- **Eastern Oregon University** and **Portland Community College** have initiated their applications and are also in the second stage of waiting for the accreditors, but because they weren't previously Second Chance Pell grant programs, they are unable to offer Pell grant-funded programs until they receive U.S. Department of Education approval.

The students at our two pilot institutions have enthusiastically engaged in these new online education opportunities.

- At Snake River Correctional Institution, online education is being provided through Treasure Valley Community College. Forty-nine (49) students have enrolled in the program since the Fall of 2023, 35 are currently enrolled, and we anticipate 2 graduating with their associate degree after the summer term.
- At Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Portland State University has been providing online education. PCC is in the Pell grant approval process and will soon be able to also offer online Pell grant-funded courses as well. Eighty-three (83) students have been enrolled since the program's inception, and 47 are currently enrolled in online PSU courses and accessing PSU's Learning Management System (LMS). An additional 30 are enrolled in PCC courses and utilizing the laptops and computer labs while awaiting PCC's readiness to offer online courses inside CCCF. In December 2024, many gathered to celebrate the graduation of our first online bachelor's program student from PSU's Higher Education in Prison degree program.

### **Impacts:**

Prison education has long been closely associated with reduced recidivism and rates of prison violence, where education programs are present. However, these programs require appropriate funding for necessary prison infrastructure changes, hardware, software, and other equipment

purchases, and staffing to supervise online education computer labs, coordinate the addition of new online courses, support student learning, and assist with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (commonly known as FAFSA). The only DOC education staff currently working within our institutions are those provided by the SB1522 pilot. Further, DOC's current information technology (IT) capacity is limited. Additional IT staff will be needed to build out the network and provide, maintain, and audit equipment at future sites. Additional IT capacity will also be needed to assist with planning and vendor review and to complete the Department of Administration Services Enterprise Information Systems (EIS) review and approval process. These additional resources are required if DOC is expected to expand availability of online education beyond CCCF and SRCI.

**Requested Action:**

To expand online education to the remaining 10 institutions, DOC must receive the appropriate funding for the staffing and network resources identified to ensure secure internet access for higher education purposes can be provided. Based on our experience with establishing online education at the pilot institutions, DOC also believes an incremental roll-out to the remaining institutions would provide the best opportunity for success. It takes significant effort to stand up the computer labs and install the infrastructure needed to establish secure Wi-Fi inside an institution, and it is a big lift for each location. DOC will need to go through the Department of Administrative Services to hire new staff. We also need time to work with each education partner to whitelist web pages, establish access to their LMS, etc. Attempting to establish online education programs at all ten locations simultaneously would be exceedingly difficult. Further, rolling out online education in institution groupings (2 or 3 at a time) enables us to prioritize institutions who already have Pell approved colleges or universities in their area who are ready to provide services. For these reasons, DOC would request an amendment to revise the proposed final completion date from September 1, 2026, to accommodate this approach.

Thank you for your time. I am available to answer any questions you may have.

*Submitted by:*  
Oregon Department of Corrections  
Larry Bennett, Assistant Director for Correctional Services  
[Larry.W.Bennett@doc.oregon.gov](mailto:Larry.W.Bennett@doc.oregon.gov)