

Chair Hudson , Vice-Chairs Fragala and Harbick, Honorable Committee members, I'm Michael Dembrow, until a little over a month ago Chair of Senate Education. I'm here to lead off this public hearing on HB 2747, which continues and expands an important prison education and training program that began in 2022.

Let me set some context for you. Back in 2015 the Legislature passed SB 969, which created the Task Force On Reentry, which I then co-chaired with Senator Jackie Winters. The purpose of the task force was to examine ways to improve outcomes for Adults in Custody after release, reducing recidivism rates, and making it more likely that they would become successful members of our communities. One of the primary things we learned was that a successful release begins while the individual is still inside. Those who have had access to good education and training programs while inside are far more likely to be successful on the outside. The challenge that we faced, though, was that most of the post-secondary programs in Oregon prisons, the result of partnerships with our colleges and universities, and which had been robust prior to the 1990s, no longer existed.

That was due primarily to two reasons: First, in 1994, Congress removed Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated people. Access to these grants had provided the funding that allowed our colleges and universities to partner with DOC to offer courses and training programs inside. And second, after the passage of Ballot Measure 5 in 1990, the colleges and universities were forced to rely more and more on tuition dollars to fund their programs. No Pell Grant meant no programs inside our prisons. It was a huge challenge.

Fortunately, Congress eventually saw the errors of its ways, realizing the broad benefits of investing in this potential workforce. Working in partnership with the Department of Education during the first Trump administration, Congress authorized what came to be called Second Chance Pell at the very end of its 2020 Lame Duck session. It would take a few years for rules to be written and the program rolled out.

In the meantime, here in Oregon we knew that it was crucial that we be prepared and positioned to really take advantage of this new resource. In 2021 we passed SB 234, which directed the HECC to convene a group to make recommendations on how best to serve adults in custody who would become eligible to receive student grants. The group agreed that it was crucial that the different colleges and universities work together in a coordinated fashion to make sure that services were provided most effectively and efficiently. AICs can be moved from institution to institution at any time, so it is crucial that they not have to start all over whenever they move. In addition, the more that their studies inside can be connected with academic and apprenticeship programs on the outside, the more effective the reentry process would be.

Fortunately, around this same time, faculty and program managers from around the state formed a statewide organization called the Oregon Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (OCHEP). Again, the goal of this organization is to better coordinate this work, minimize inter-institutional in-fighting, and share best practices. You'll find posted on OLIS a presentation that the current OCHEP Chair provided to Senate Education in December, describing the group, as well as pointing out the many benefits of prison education programs.

The recommendations from the SB 234 group led to a series of further bills in 2022 and 2023 in order to promote coordination and clarify the roles of the HECC, the DOC, and the individual colleges and universities. Some of you will remember those bills, which found strong support in this committee.

Most relevant to our discussion today is SB 1522 from 2022. SB 1522 was an omnibus Senate Education bill, one of whose parts was funding pilot programs allowing for access to laptops and distance learning for AICs at two of our prisons. We chose Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, the state's prison for women, and Snake River Correctional Institution, the very large men's prison in Eastern Oregon.

SB 1522 required DOC to develop a plan by December 2022 for providing the equipment, infrastructure, and connectivity needed to provide these AICs with internet access to education and vocation programs. It also required DOC to have these services in place by September 2023. Our intention was to use these pilots to work out the kinks, overcome challenges, and then expand to other institutions. You'll find a description of the proposed pilots in testimony from DOC posted on OLIS.

Between then and now a great deal of important work has been accomplished. While the rollout of Second Chance Pell has been long, slow, arduous, and frustrating across the country, including here in Oregon, we have also seen some notable successes. Central Oregon Community College and Portland State University were among the first five schools in the nation to be approved for Second Chance Pell—an incredible achievement.

This past September DOC provided Senate Education with an update on how the pilots were working, and you'll also find that on OLIS. In his presentation Assistant DOC Director Larry Bennett let us know that the pilots were definitely proving their value, though they were not without challenges. Putting Wi-Fi infrastructure inside prisons has taken more time than anticipated just because of the physical nature of the facilities—with so much concrete. Having onsite staff to assist AICs in computer labs and manage the programs from the inside was crucial. Overall, though, the challenges were being overcome and it was time to bring in more institutions.

And that, Mr. Chair and Committee Members, is what HB 2747 does. It extends the program to all of DOC's twelve prisons, i.e., an additional 10, by September 2026. It will allow AICs equitable access to programs wherever they may be located. Thanks to access to the internet and enhanced coordination and partnerships by the colleges and universities, the offerings can be more extensive and more efficiently delivered. We obviously would like to see the correctional facilities get to that ultimate goal as soon as possible.

Having said that, it may be necessary to phase in the expansion over time. As you'll see in DOC's testimony on HB 2747, even if the necessary funding is secured, it will be difficult for them to get there all at once in the 15 months following this session. Identifying and hiring staff and making the facilities Wi-Fi ready will take time. They are requesting an amendment that would extend the expansion over time, starting with those facilities served by academic institutions that have already been approved for Second Chance Pell or are on track to be there soon. They are recommending that you start with Deer Ridge Correctional Institution (served by Central Oregon CC), Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution (served by Eastern Oregon University and Treasure Valley CC), and Oregon State Correctional Institution (served by Chemeketa CC). That makes a lot of sense, and I would recommend that the Committee work with DOC, the HECC, and OCHEP on crafting such an amendment.

Again, Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I'm going to be followed now by people doing this work on the ground, including one or more students. I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have either now or after their testimony. And I will add that DOC is here in the hearing room and are prepared to answer any questions that you may have.