



Legislative Testimony

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

February 24, 2025

The Honorable Dacia Grayber, Chair
House Committee on Labor and Workplace Standards

Subject: House Bill 2972

Chair Grayber 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 written testimony on House Bill (HB) 2972.

What the Bill Does:

HB 2972 would provide funds for Oregon Employment Department (OED) staffing directly related to the OED, Oregon Workforce Partnership, and DOC's WorkSource Reentry Program. This program is currently funded by a federal grant, and this bill would secure permanent funding. It proposes placement of OED staff in each DOC facility to provide both institutional and community-based employment services. The allocation for OED staff would provide consistency in operations with one entity (OED) overseeing the statewide program.

Background:

DOC has been collaborating with East Cascades Works, the Oregon Workforce Partnership, and the OED over the past 20 months to install WorkSource Centers inside every DOC prison in the state. Even with all the opportunities available for education, certifications, apprenticeships, licensures, it can still be difficult for people to find work following release from prison. These pre-release WorkSource Centers bridge that gap and ensure a warm handoff to continued employment services and support in the community upon release.

The original pilots at Deer Ridge Correctional Institution and Warner Creek Correctional Facility were funded through in-kind donations from OED and DOC. OED provided staff support and DOC provided space, hardware, and access to technology. Future Ready Oregon funds were awarded to explore the possibility of aligning all 9 Workforce Development Boards with DOC institutions and the expansion to all DOC institutions is currently being funded through a U.S. Department of Labor Pathway Home grant. The centers, operated by a DOC Transition Coordinator and a dedicated, local Oregon Employment Department or local Workforce Development Board-contracted staff person, provide adults in custody (AICs) preparing to release with access to the same state employment services used by thousands of Oregonians in the community.

DOC Transition Coordinators and workforce development staff work alongside each other to help participating AICs prepare for release. AICs first attend a reentry class on employment and

then are transitioned to the WorkSource Computer Labs wherein they receive one-on-one assistance with developing a career plan, identifying additional training or resources needed for employment, enrolling in the state iMatchSkills employment services database, and engaging in other in-person reentry and employment centered services. The ultimate goal of these services is to increase the number of AICs releasing with a job opportunity. For those without an offer at release, the work begun prior to release results in a warm handoff to their local WorkSource provider in their county of release. This program paves the way for wraparound support regardless of where an AIC is releasing across Oregon. The alignment of the Workforce Development Boards has allowed for coordination of care across their continuum of service and a soft landing for AICs otherwise without supports. Research has consistently demonstrated that access to meaningful employment quickly post release not only reduces the risk of future criminal behavior, it also increases the ability of individual to obtain stable housing. Both elements are necessary in supporting a successful reentry plan for individuals and communities.

During the 2023-24 program year in just our two pilot locations, we had 332 participants enroll, 277 of which released. One hundred thirty-eight (about 50%) continued services after release, and of those, 107 - nearly 78% - secured employment or were assisted with additional training. In addition, in analyzing participant data from our Big Machines heavy equipment training grant project, we found only about 20% of those from all six of our participating institutions engaged in WorkSource Center services after release. However, for Big Machines participants that released from the two pilot locations with WorkSource Centers, 46% engaged or reengaged in WorkSource Center services after release.

Impacts:

The U.S. Department of Labor Pathway Home grant funding will end soon. The cessation of grant funds jeopardizes the ability of the program to continue providing these services after the grant period if our partners are unsuccessful in receiving the additional funding proposed in HB 2972.

Thank you for your time. I would be glad to make myself 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