

Testimony in Support of HB 2405
Oregon State Legislature

Chair Hudson, Vice-Chairs Fragala and Harbick, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Lisa Guirsch, and I am a Director of Project Rebound PNW, a reentry specialist, and a formerly incarcerated person with about 28 years of lived expertise. The only reason I'm standing before you today—not back behind bars—is because I had access to higher education while incarcerated. That opportunity changed my life. I have a Bachelors of Social Science, A minor in ASL, a minor in Business, and a minor in Law and Legal Studies. Today, I work alongside state and county leaders, advocate for policy change, and help justice-impacted individuals reintegrate successfully into our communities. I serve on many advisory boards in the state of Oregon, Multnomah county, and even hold elected positions in my city. Education made that possible.

Oregon has nearly 12,000 people incarcerated, and approximately 36% of them are housed in Eastern Oregon. Over the next four years, DOC projects that 1,623 people from those institutions will be released. These men will return to your districts, your communities—**they will be your neighbors**. The question is: will they come home with the tools to succeed, or will we have failed them before they even step out the door?

HB 2405 ensures these individuals have access to higher education—so they can get jobs that pay the rent, cover their bills, and contribute to our economy. Every taxpayer should want this, because education reduces recidivism, keeps people off welfare, and increases public safety. We always say we want a better future for our children—what better way to protect them than by investing in programs that help people make better choices?

This bill is a no-brainer. Education worked for me. It works for thousands of others. And it will work for the people in Eastern Oregon—if we give them the chance. I urge you to support HB 2405.

By the way, the National Prison Debate League beat Harvard and MIT. This illuminates the fact that some of the brightest minds are incarcerated. We need to expand education access to ALL INCARCERATED PEOPLE. You never know....one of these people might be the one who saves your life, or the lives of one of your children. We do have formerly incarcerated scientists who work at some of the best institutions.

Thank you.

Lisa Guirsch

Project Rebound PNW