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Submitter: Dr. Barry Jerkins, Branch President
On Behalf Of: Linn Benton NAACP
Committee: Senate Committee On Human Services
Topic: Endorsement of HB 2639

Since 1909, the NAACP has worked to ensure political, educational, social, and economic equality for all people while eliminating race-based discrimination. Our Linn Benton Branch, established in 1971, advances this mission through engagement that confronts racial injustice in our community and the broader state of Oregon.

Our Branch urges the Oregon Senate to approve HB 2639 that changes the process for setting aside offense convictions and dismissals and contempt findings.

Due to racial profiling and discriminatory criminal justice policies, African Americans and Latinos are far more likely to have arrest and conviction records than Whites. For example, even though African Americans make up less than 14% of the population, they account for 28% of all arrests. A recent study found that the percentage of adult males with a history of imprisonment is 16.6% for African Americans and 7.7% for Latinos, but only 2.6% for whites. And although illicit drug use is nearly the same for African Americans as for White people, African Americans are much more likely to be arrested for drug use. This act offers vital help to those with a criminal history seeking to reintegrate into their communities after incarceration. It will improve access to basic needs essential to prevent recidivism such as employment and housing.

But we are reminded by Aaron Knott, Director of Government Relations and Communications of the Oregon Department of Justice, that many individuals who are fully eligible for a set aside may never receive one. The passage of Senate Bill 397 in 2021 rapidly increased the number of petitions for criminal conviction set asides. This resulted in significant backlogs in many courts. HB 2639, as written, has the potential to worsen this problem unless necessary resources are allocated. The Linn Benton NAACP recommends that this bill be amended to insure sufficient funding is allocated to assure effectiveness of this legislation.

Please support HB 2639. It marks an important step toward providing equal opportunities and justice for all Oregonians.

Respectfully,
Dr. Barry Jerkins
Branch President, Linn Benton NAACP