

DOZENS OF CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, FAITH GROUPS, VOW TO CONTINUE FIGHT TO GUARANTEE VOTING RIGHTS FOR INCARCERATED OREGONIANS

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PORTLAND, Ore. - Weeks of inaction during Oregon's 2023 legislative session have led to the failure of a bill which would have guaranteed the right to vote to all incarcerated Oregonians who are U.S. citizens. Senate Bill 579 would have allowed people serving sentences for felony convictions to register to vote, update their voter registration, and vote in elections based on where they were living before they were incarcerated. Oregon already allows people who are formerly incarcerated to vote after their release, including those with felony convictions. Individuals being held in jail pre-trial, those who are incarcerated for misdemeanors, and those in Oregon Youth Authority custody who are otherwise eligible can also vote.

Almost everyone who is imprisoned will one day return to the community, so it is in the whole community's interest to encourage healthy reintegration for those who have been incarcerated. Strengthening community ties has been shown to do just that, and voting is one way of engaging people in prison in caring for the community and thinking about their role in the future of their family and their state. Successful re-entry has been shown in study after study to greatly reduce the risk of reoffending and returning to prison.

Biases and inequities in our legal system mean the disenfranchisement of incarcerated people disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, Latine, low-income, and young Oregonians and their families and communities. The denial of the right to vote to people serving a sentence for a felony conviction dates back decades.

"We're disheartened that problems at the legislature have prevented many important bills from passing that would have made a critical difference in the lives of Oregonians," said Nuhamin Eiden, Deputy Director, Unite Oregon. "In the case of Senate Bill 579 specifically, without its passage it has ensured that as many as 12,000 people in prison continue to be denied their right to vote. Failing to pass this bill means these individuals remain distant from their communities and their loved ones. Restoring their voting rights would have encouraged the critical connections that support successful reentry."

More than 50 civil rights organizations and faith-based groups as well as dozens of currently and formerly incarcerated people came together to back SB 579. The coalition was led by a steering committee made up of representatives from the ACLU of Oregon, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Next Up Action Fund, the Oregon Justice Resource Center, Secure Democracy USA, The Sentencing Project, Stand Up America, Unite Oregon, and the Urban League of Portland.

"We're so proud and grateful to the many individuals and groups around Oregon who have come together to strongly support the right of incarcerated people to vote," said

Elona J Wilson, Executive Director at Next Up Action Fund. “Through our shared commitment to guaranteeing the right to vote, we have sought to expand access to participate in the democratic process, helping build a stronger and safer state for us all.”

The Guaranteeing the Right to Vote coalition will continue to advocate on this issue and looks forward to bringing this bill back in a subsequent session with the goal of achieving a national first by restoring voting rights to the incarcerated.

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For more information on SB 579 and the coalition in support of Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, visit <https://www.guaranteevotingrights.org/>.