

Submitted July 5, 2022

Good evening Members of the Committee,

My name is KC Lewis, I am the managing attorney for the Mental Health Rights Project with Disability Rights Oregon. Disability Rights Oregon is Oregon's federally designated protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities. Among our responsibilities, we are tasked with monitoring facilities where people with disabilities are held and with ensuring that their rights and well-being are protected. Unfortunately, due to our society's failure to invest in community mental health resources and our choice to criminalize mental illness, jail monitoring has become a key aspect of our work as more and more people with mental illness and other disabilities are funneled into our local jails.

I am testifying this evening in support of the recommendations of the Safety and Justice Subcommittee regarding ongoing constituent jail inspections. DRO staff are regular visitors to the Multnomah County Jail, and have had a collaborative and constructive relationship with the Multnomah County Sheriff's office working together to improve conditions in our jails for people with disabilities. But too often, those whose work doesn't require them to walk into our jails and talk to the people who are living there can struggle to understand how vulnerable many of the people we are jailing are and how important it is that we do everything that we can to keep them safe.

The proposal before the committee would create a new opportunity for our community to monitor conditions in Multnomah County's jails, and in doing so to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disabled person in the criminal justice system and why a jail is not the right place for someone experiencing the symptoms of mental illness. It will push us to simultaneously improve conditions in the jails and rethink the policies of criminalization and community disinvestment that has led us to treat those jails as de facto mental health institutions. Disability Rights Oregon urges the committee to move forward with these recommendations.

KC Lewis