



Justice De Muniz and Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Karen Meurer and I am the executive director of PHOENIX Rising Transitions and a leader with the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good – or MACG. PHOENIX is a nonprofit that has been working for over ten years with people inside of Oregon state prisons, training them in leadership, conflict resolution and communication skills. We continue to mentor people in the Portland metro area once they are out and seek opportunities for them to interact with a variety of community members on joint projects that promote community strength and responsible citizenship. Many of PHOENIX's community volunteers come through our participation in MACG – a broad-based alliance of faith groups, labor unions and community organizations engaged in community organizing.

MACG works toward community-based solutions to problems that impact our members – such as affordable health care, environmental sustainability, job creation, education, and criminal justice. We are therefore concerned about the costs – both human and economic – of mandatory minimum sentencing.

First, we are concerned about the negative impact that longer sentences have on family relationships, future employment and long-term financial sustainability.

Second, we are concerned with the ineffectiveness of mandatory sentencing on public safety. As you may know, longer prison sentences are associated with higher recidivism rates for both high- and low-risk offenders.¹

And third, we are concerned about the high cost of building prisons for a growing population that leaves less funding for programs that have been demonstrated effective in increasing success for people both before and after release.

PHOENIX is a co-founding partner of the Reentry Transition Center in Portland – along with MercyCorps NW, Prison Fellowship, Better People and Project Clean Slate. Through the Center we are able to meet basic needs, assistance with housing, employment, mentoring, substance abuse treatment and a host of other services – which are essential post-prison success. But beyond the services provided by professionals is a deep need to reconnect with the community. Ex-cons need community support and participation to make the identity shift from criminal and prisoner to responsible citizen. And unfortunately, service providers are sometimes part of the problem, treating former prisoners with a lack of respect, which discourages them from seeking needed services.² Reclaiming their identity as responsible citizens can only happen with positive and direct interaction between community members and former prisoners.

PHOENIX members take seriously their role as responsible citizens – whether volunteering, voting or sharing their story to help prevent others from taking the path they took. To that end they have made numerous presentations at local colleges; they organized three sign-up events for the *Healthy Kids* program; they canvassed the Cully neighborhood along with other volunteers to announce MACG's project to retrofit 100 homes for energy efficiency in their neighborhood, they made a presentation to North Portland Neighborhood Services Public Safety Action Committee, they jointly led a community organizing training with members of the Portland Youth and Elders Council, and for the last five years they took a lead role in planning, emceeding and running the safety team for *Hands Across the Bridge*, an annual event that celebrates recovery from addictions. PHOENIX's recidivism rate is only 21.8% – lower than the state's 27.8%. I believe this is because former prisoners are treated as responsible citizens by community members that participate alongside them in the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good.