



OREGON LEGISLATORS VOTE TO ELIMINATE PUNISHMENT EXCEPTION TO CONSTITUTIONAL BAN ON SLAVERY

SJR 10 passes the legislature and will now be referred to voters

June 24, 2021

PORTLAND, Ore. – Oregon took a historic step today in service of eradicating slavery in the state with the passage of Senate Joint Resolution 10 through both chambers of the legislature with strong bipartisan support. SJR 10 proposes a constitutional amendment to prohibit slavery and involuntary servitude in all circumstances. Oregon’s constitution has banned slavery since its approval in 1857 but includes an exception when slavery is imposed as a punishment for a crime. SJR 10 proposes to amend Article 1, Section 34 of the Oregon Constitution to remove the language permitting people convicted of crimes to be subjected to involuntary servitude.

Oregon is far from alone among US states in giving legal permission to the enslavement of incarcerated people. It’s also not the only state in which efforts are underway to remove this type of inhumane language. Colorado ended its “punishment exception” in 2018, with Utah and Nebraska following suit in 2020. At the federal level, Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) has introduced an amendment in Congress to abolish the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution’s punishment exception.

Oregonians Against Slavery and Involuntary Servitude (OASIS), a grassroots organization made up of Willamette University alumni and incarcerated people, was created last summer with the goal of ending slavery in Oregon. They worked with Chief Sponsors Representative Janelle Bynum, Senator James Manning, Senator Lew Frederick, and Senator Rob Wagner to introduce the resolution. SJR 10 was carried on the House side by Representative Maxine Dexter who played a key role in its passage.

“Changing our state constitution does away with outdated language that speaks to the racist legacy of slavery,” said Jordan Schott, Director of Legislative Strategy, OASIS. “But this is

about more than just words: BIPOC communities are disproportionately impacted by our criminal legal system. Passing this legislation amplifies the message that Oregon is committed to being actively anti-racist. It is imperative that Oregonians support this amendment at the ballot to ensure that slavery is truly a thing of the past.”

The nonprofit law firm the Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC) which provides legal representation to people in prison was among supporters of SJR 10.

“Updating the constitution to remove the punishment exception is a step toward a more just and equitable Oregon,” said Zach Winston, Policy Director, OJRC. “The dignity and humanity of incarcerated Oregonians is not in question, but our constitution fails to recognize that fact. The strong connections between historical slavery and mass incarceration deserve further scrutiny and action.”

Oregonians will get the chance to have their say on the decision when the constitutional amendment proposed by SJR 10 is referred to voters. That vote is expected to take place in November 2022.

ENDS/