

# Oregon legislators will try again to restore prisoners' voting rights

By Kira Lerner & Julia Shumway  
Oregon Capital Chronicle

Oregon legislators stymied in their attempt earlier this year to restore voting rights to thousands of incarcerated Oregonians will try again in 2022.

Rep. Lisa Reynolds, D-Portland, announced Thursday that she plans to introduce legislation for the February session of the Oregon Legislature to restore voting rights to people serving time for felonies. If passed, roughly 12,000 to 15,000 incarcerated people would have their right to vote restored.

The reform would mean that all people incarcerated in the state, whether in state prisons or county jails, could vote while in detention. Oregon has barred

inmates from voting since the territory created the disenfranchisement law in an 1857 constitutional convention.

"The right to vote is fundamental," Reynolds said. "It upholds the foundation of our democracy and democracy works better when everyone has a voice. We cannot continue the decades of disenfranchisement of incarcerated individuals in our state."

The change would disproportionately impact the state's African-American population, as Black people make up more than 9% of Oregon's prison population despite comprising under 2% of the state population.

Currently just Maine, Vermont, and Washington, D.C., allow people to vote while incarcerated. If the bill succeeds, Oregon

would be the first state to end the practice of felony disenfranchisement.

Although the proposal never made it out of committee in the 2021 Oregon session, advocates predicted it stands a better chance in February and they expect most Democratic lawmakers to sign on as sponsors. Five Democratic legislators attended the online campaign launch on Thursday.

"This time around there is even more energy," said Zach Winston, policy director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, which is advocating the change. "Our coalition has grown by 10 organizations, and there is significant community support."

Winston explained that the last legislative proposal failed after the state Corrections Department produced an

"unexpected" fiscal note, estimating the cost to let inmates vote in the current two-year budget cycle would be more than \$400,000. The cost was for hiring two full-time employees to help incarcerated people register to vote.

"We didn't have a chance to combat it," he said.

This year, Reynolds said she's intent on proposing a policy change that shouldn't trigger any fiscal impact and is talking to the Corrections Department to assuage concerns about needing additional staff.

Sen. Akasha Lawrence Spence, a Portland Democrat recently appointed to the Senate, said legislative turnover could also help pass the proposal. The senator she replaced wasn't among the co-sponsors of the 2021 bill,

and the northwest Oregon coast will soon have a new Democratic senator instead of state Sen. Betsy Johnson, who co-chaired the committee that took no action on the last legislation.

"There's going to be a lot more diversity in both chambers in terms of lived experience, in terms of racial background and things like that," Lawrence Spence said. "I think that that's going to be a different driving force behind this."

Incarcerated Oregonians would cast ballots using their last known address before incarceration. Last session, there was confusion among lawmakers about that point, Winston said, with some concerned they would use the prison as their address.

All Oregonians who are

registered to vote automatically receive their ballots in the mail, and a 2019 law added pre-paid return envelopes. Ballots can't be forwarded, but people can have them sent to a temporary address, such as a college dorm or a county jail. People waiting for trial or serving time for a misdemeanor retain their right to vote.

"We're perfectly situated to actually do this," said Isabela Villarreal, policy and communications manager for Next Up Oregon, which is also supporting the change. "Because of paid postage, they wouldn't even have to try to find a stamp or pay for a stamp."

Secretary of State Shemia Fagan is supporting the coalition working to pass the legislation, according to the coalition.

## THREAT Police response prompted

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to send your students to school."

Klickitat County Sheriff Bob Songer said in a press release that the threat arose out of a nationwide trend on social media platform TikTok. The threat targeted Columbia High School specifically and identified Dec. 16 as the day when violence was to occur. A deputy was able to identify and make contact with the source of the threat, one unnamed 14-year-old.

Deputy Dwane Matulovich determined the threat was not credible.

"The Klickitat County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies in Klickitat County are taking

any threat serious, despite the TikTok challenge," Songer said.

Online news organization The Verge reported on Friday that Districts in California, Texas, Minnesota, and Missouri announced plans to cancel school Friday, and that other districts planned to heighten security measures in response to the reports.

TikTok's communications team said in a Twitter post that "We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness, which is why we're working with law enforcement to look into warnings about potential violence at schools even though we have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok."

"We've exhaustively searched for content that promotes violence at schools today, but have still found nothing. What we find are videos discussing this rumor

and warning others to stay safe, the company said in the post. "Local authorities, the FBI, and DHS have confirmed there's no credible threat, so we're working to remove alarmist warnings that violate our misinformation policy."

White Salmon Valley Superintendent Sean McGeeney said the threat appeared to target Columbia High School. It emerged from Instagram, he said.

Columbia High School Principal Craig McKee notified McGeeney and law enforcement officials, who then were in constant communication with one another, McGeeney recalled during a regular meeting of the White Salmon Valley School Board.

Two to three sheriff's deputies were posted on and around campus as well as an officer from Bingen-White Salmon Police Department on Thursday, McGeeney

said. Meanwhile, McGeeney said district staff were present and aware of the threats and had been keeping eyes on the campus throughout the day.

It was literally all hands on deck," he said.

In a phone interview, McGeeney recounted the district's "open and fluid communication between staff members and law enforcement."

"Everything moved as it was supposed to move," he said. "The kids' safety stayed as a focus the whole time."

During Thursday's school board meeting, board member Billy Gross noted parents told him they had not received an alert from the school that day.

McGeeney responded by noting the communication with the community was not perfect. The first message that was sent out exceeded their communication

system's character limit, causing the message to not be sent via text message.

One parent said during the public commenting period that some parents received emails while others did not, "Because I did not get an email. But then in the afternoon to tell parents everything safe and most parents had no idea until they got that text in the afternoon that everything's safe... why can you not communicate to us in the beginning that you are investigating something?"

Goldendale Superintendent Ellen Perconti told *The Goldendale Sentinel* that "Monday morning, GHS received information regarding a student who had made statements that were perceived as a possible threat. The student was pulled aside before entering classes on Monday morning prior to any interaction with students. The situation was

handled professionally and appropriately by (Goldendale High School Principal) Mr. Westerman and GHS staff."

Perconti had not responded to a request for comment on Friday's closures by press deadline.

While no threats were reported at Wasco County and Hood River County schools, both districts sent out announcements reminding parents who have concerns about a student's mental well-being to contact the student's principal, and that SafeOregon is a statewide program that allows anyone to report a tip regarding school safety.

Hood River Valley High School Principal Columbia Jones asked parents not to repost threats on social media, saying it "serves no purpose other than adding to the fear and uncertainty of the situation."

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