

# Pulling the arc toward justice

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**D**r. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." President Obama added, "But it does not do so on its own. It does so because there are hands of ordinary people doing extraordinary things every single day and they pull that arc in the direction of justice."

Recent grand juries' decisions not to indict police officers involved in killing unarmed people has led many people to question whether the arc is bending

toward justice. Partnership for Safety and Justice believes that these killings are the tragic expression of a brutal system that has led to 2.3 million Americans currently being held behind bars, the criminalization of addiction and mental illness, and the prosecution of children as if they were fully developed adults. This system and its extreme costliness have also diverted resources from services for crime victims, addiction treatment, mental health care, education and other programs that help people emerge from poverty and participate successfully in society.

PSJ also believes that this system can change. As painful as it is to experience continued injustice, we are also encouraged by movement towards increased justice. As PSJ reaffirms our commitment to creating justice, safety and health throughout our communities in 2015, we wanted to acknowledge some of the gains made this year, as we dig in our heels so we can pull more towards justice next year.

## Justice Reinvestment

In 2013, PSJ helped pass HB 3194, transformative reform legislation that flatlines prison growth for five years and saves more than \$300 million. HB 3194 created the Justice Reinvestment Grant Program, which distributes savings from averted prison growth into community-

based programs that help people succeed, like victim services, re-entry services, addiction treatment and mental health programs.

PSJ knows that policies are only effective if they're implemented well. In the 2014 session, we engaged legislators on how their communities are investing in justice reinvestment funding. We worked with allies to protect justice reinvestment from being watered down through proposed legislative changes. Thanks to the smart decision-making and dedication of legislators, justice reinvestment is still intact. Oregon is on track to spend less on prison beds and invest more in community health and safety.

## Access to Emergency Housing

PSJ was honored to support the Housing Alliance's efforts during the 2014 session to increase funding to prevent homelessness. Everyone deserves a safe place to call home — obtaining one can be difficult for domestic violence survivors. Often, abusive partners control money and resources, so survivors may not have access to bank accounts or ID. Without these resources, it is extremely difficult to rent a new apartment or even a motel room for the night. For survivors living at poverty levels, the challenges are even larger.

Legislators invested an additional \$2 million to help prevent or end homelessness. Now, 1,300 additional Oregonians, many of whom are domestic violence survivors, have a safe place to stay!

## Justice for Oregon's Youth

In the 2014 session, PSJ promoted smart policy to treat youth convicted of Measure 11 offenses as youth, instead of adults. We helped pass HB 4037, which enables youth convicted as adults to go directly to an Oregon Youth Authority facility for intake. In the past, youth were transported — together with adult offenders — to an adult prison, before being transferred to OYA. Some youth spent a week or more in the adult prison for processing, usually in an isolation cell for their own protection. HB

4037 helps ensure that youth can go directly to OYA and begin the rehabilitation process immediately.

## Oregon Measure 91

Oregon voters approved Measure 91 by 56 percent. Measure 91 establishes a controlled system of legal marijuana regulation and taxation for adults 21 and over. Oregon joins Washington and Colorado, and now Alaska and Washington, D.C., as places where voters have rejected laws that criminalize people who use marijuana.

PSJ urged a yes vote on Measure 91. We believe that marijuana should be addressed as a health issue, not a crime. For decades, tough-on-crime drug sentencing policies tied up law enforcement dollars, restricted employment opportunities and access to housing for people convicted of marijuana offenses, and often resulted in the unfair treatment of young people and people of color. Too many public resources were diverted that should have been used to help crime victims and address unmet community needs across Oregon.

## California Proposition 47

It's worth acknowledging California's pull toward justice in the November election. Passing by 58.5 percent, Proposition 47 retroactively reclassifies many low-level property and drug offenses from felonies to misdemeanors. As many as 10,000 people convicted of these offenses may now be eligible to petition for early release. There may be 40,000 fewer felony convictions in California each year.

Like Oregon's justice reinvestment, savings are invested back into communities. California is estimated to save \$150 million, which will be used to support victim services, mental health and addiction treatment, students' success, and programs providing alternatives to incarceration.

These are just some of the extraordinary changes that ordinary people created this year. We know we still have a long way to go. Together, let's see how far we can pull the arc toward justice in 2015.

## PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

Partnership for Safety and Justice is a statewide, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.

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