

Kathleen Atkinson, OSB
701.426.8747

Wednesday, February 5, 2025
HB 1417
House Judiciary Committee

Mister Chairman and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,
Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Sister Kathleen Atkinson. I serve as the director of *Ministry on the Margins* and have been part of the ND Reentry Study Work Group. I speak in favor of HB 1417 because it addresses systemic structures that jeopardize and demoralize a person trying to successfully navigate reentry from prison. In particular, I would like to address the financial burdens that significantly impact the poor.

I want to tell you about Art (Real person. Fabricated name). He was a leader and mentor while serving in the Marine Corp and he showed those skills while in prison. Art worked at a prison job and saved his money for release. At the time of release, Art had over a thousand dollars saved up; far more money than most inmates. He acquired cheap housing and found work.

All looked successful, though challenging, and then I saw defeat enter Art's eyes. He was presented with fees from his trial and court expenses. He began to pay them off but could not keep up and was threatened with jail time for nonpayment. A monthly supervision fee of \$55 does not seem like much – for me it's probably just my coffee money - but for someone working minimum wage, that is an entire 8-hour day. Electronic monitoring added cost. Required anger management classes added cost. Not only were his original savings quickly depleted, but various fees were taking a major percentage of his salary. Required classes and meetings during the workday were cutting into available work hours, frustrating both Art and his employer.

As he went deeper into debt, he began to question if he would ever become free; Art fell into remembrances of prison success and was tempted to just let go and slip back into that world. But that is not the purpose of our Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The mission of the DOCR is to be about *transforming lives, influencing change, and strengthening community*. It is to expect change and identify barriers to successful reentry – whether they come from the individual himself or from the system established to help him. When fees and costs like those identified in HB 1417 become a burden to a justice-involved individual, it not only sets them up for failure. It impacts a family relying on his or her income. It increases recidivism...not for a new crime but for loss of a pathway out of bondage.

And it creates one more person caught in a cycle which is costing us far too much in finances and in human life.

HB 1417 offers one way to break that cycle.