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Jason
Oregon Department of Corrections
Snake River Corrections Institute (SRCI)
OCE Call Center
777 Stanton Blvd
Ontario, OR 97914

TO:
Ken Jeske, Administrator
Shawn Haywood, Deputy Administrator
Oregon Corrections Enterprises

RE: Who's being taken advantage of with prison labor?

From within prison walls I've helped multiple companies make millions of dollars during my incarceration, all while making $250 a month. Some of you think you could speak on my behalf and say this constitutes my exploitation. You would be wrong. I would willingly and happily do it again for free. Hence, you should let me speak for myself.

My name is Jason . I'm 41 years old and serving a 20 years' sentence. I have been incarcerated at SRCI for 19 years. For the last 16 years I have voluntarily and happily participated in a Works Skills Program facilitated by Oregon Corrections Enterprises (OCE) that focuses on the Call Center Industry here at SRCI. I have been working directly for the subcontractor for this duration.

I have worked my way from phone agent to trainer, to floor-lead, to customer service rep, to my position now where I perform business development. I have the pleasure and responsibility of helping grow the program by contacting prospective new clients and recruiting them to utilize our services, thus helping them grow their business and also creating more opportunities for inmates to voluntarily participate.

While I cannot speak on behalf of every inmate's exact feelings who have participated in this program, because of my lengthy tenure in the program, I have had the privilege of working with, training and coaching over a thousand inmates, so I understand generally how most of them feel. The vast majority of them, through their work ethic, actions, commitment and exhibited behaviors during this time clearly demonstrate a willingness, appreciation, and gratitude to be able to freely take part in this rare opportunity. The overwhelming majority of us come to work every day with a sense of freedom, opportunity and hope. And, we do so of our own volition. What exists here within in this program is an environment and an opportunity that is absent from the rest of the entirety of the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC).

First, you must understand that this program is the only truly volunteer positions in ODOC. All participants volunteer to apply. No one can be or is forced to participate. Once in the program, participants can quit at any time, and with zero repercussions. You must understand the significance of this: there are no other forms of employment within ODOC where you can just quit. If I wash dishes in the kitchen or mop floors in a unit and I try to quit, not only can I not; I will likely face disciplinary action. If you want to take issue with prison labor, look at that, not the OCE programs where I can come and go freely.

This is also the highest paying job within the ODOC. No other programs or forms of employment within ODOC come close to paying us what this does. During my time, I've been able to pay off all of my restitution, save thousands of dollars for my

release, I have never had to ask friends or family to send me money, and I don't have to be involved in any illicit activities in order to have money for my needs – a solution to a huge problem in any prison.

This is also one of the only programs that give inmates real skills and opportunities to gain employment upon release. The sales and customer service skills we gain here are in high demand in the business world, and I have personally witnessed dozens of inmates be released and use their experience here to gain meaningful and well-paying employment. Several of the clients and contractors operating within the program have hired their inmate callers upon release and they have gone on to significant careers and success – several going on to positions paying over six-figure salaries, including one with Apple. You're insane if you think there are any other opportunities within prison for inmates to build these kinds of futures for themselves.

Candidly, the pay and the job opportunities are only a fraction of the reason so many of us eagerly come to work every day. Many of us here are actually saddened by weekends or days off, as we'd rather be at the call center than back on the unit. The atmosphere and how we are treated by OCE Staff and the private entities is what keeps us coming back to do what can be an extremely challenging job function. When we walk through the doors from the prison to the call center, it's akin to climbing out of a dark valley and suddenly standing on a mountaintop bathed in glorious, warming and uplifting sunlight.

In the rest of the institution, we aren't people and we are afforded very little dignity; intentionally or not, we are dehumanized by the system. During my incarceration I have managed to stay out of gangs, prison politics and any other behaviors that lead to trouble. I don't ask officers for anything, I don't complain, I don't file grievances. These things, coupled with my almost 19 years at SRCI have led to an existence where most officers know me and leave me be. They realize I'm not a knucklehead or troublemaker, and so I'm usually treated better than many inmates because I'm under less scrutiny. Even with all this in mind, even with officers showing me more respect than many inmates receive, my existence in prison has still degraded my sense of humanity and individuality. No matter my conduct or how I'm treated, I'm still an inmate, and that means I'm a number; I'm to be managed, secured and accounted for; my custody says somehow I'm less than human. That cloud hangs over us in here no matter how we conduct ourselves.

The OCE Call Center is the lone exception. The staff here have created an atmosphere that is the exact opposite of the rest of the prison. Here we are valued, respected, and encouraged. We are treated with dignity and shown real appreciation. It's the only place in the prison we are called by our first names. We aren't treated like inmates; we're treated like professionals who come to work every day to do the right thing. The staff work extensively to mentor, educate, coach, develop and enhance our skills and abilities. In 16 years within this program, I have been able to develop into a first-rate sales and marketing specialist. MBA students have to spend years in school and pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for the education and experience I've been given here for free. My clients now turn to me for advice and guidance on how to help them solve problems and grow their businesses. This program and the staff who facilitate it are the ones who have made the investment in me that's pushed me to this level. I have no previous business experience, no college degree. I barely have a high school diploma.

The environment the staff have fostered here allows us to take real ownership of our work and our surroundings. This enables a buy-in and a commitment from us like nothing else in the prison. The sense of pride, accomplishment and vigilance we feel for our call center goes so far that the inmates police themselves while here. There are no prison politics, extortion or gang activity within the call center – something that permeates every other part of the facility. We work together to train and better each other, regardless of crimes, gang affiliation or race. This attitude is so embedded and prevalent that it's an almost unspoken code – when new inmates start working they quickly adapt and embrace what they see in existence here without being told. For many inmates it's their only chance to escape the politics that exist on the other side of the door.

I cannot stress how unique and amazing the environment is here. Or how significant the opportunity that they have created through this program is for us. It's truly like stepping into a different world, and there's nothing else like it here in the prison. None of the other programs or jobs come close. Nothing else exists. The public is not all that thrilled about spending

money on prisons or rehabilitation, and what they do allocate is put towards more bars, more guards, and more fences. Funds allocated toward providing inmates with opportunities are minimal, making up tiny percentages of correctional budgets.

What little does gets allocated towards basic educational programs (GED, ESL) or towards basic cognitive programs (Pathfinders, Anger Management, GOGI). While both of these areas are necessary and do benefit inmates, they have extremely limited availability and do very little to create post-release opportunities. I'm not trying to diminish the value of having a GED or self-improvement programs that help change the behaviors that lead people to incarceration. I'm stating that a convict with a GED and having gone through a cognitive program isn't getting a job upon release because of having completed them. Those types of programs do not overcome the stigma of being a felon in the eyes of most employers.

This program solves that problem by allowing private-enterprises to come in and fill the void left by the lack of taxpayer funded programs. I get it, these businesses are in it to make a profit. Sometimes that's viewed as evil. In this case, it's simply not. This isn't a sweatshop and we aren't slaves here. These businesses create a voluntary opportunity for us to take advantage of. A chance for us make a better life for ourselves. So what if they profit at the same time. These aren't conflicting outcomes. That businesses can profit and we can benefit without being exploited aren't mutually exclusive; in this case they are actually symbiotic.

These businesses profit exactly because they don't exploit or take advantage of us. They value us, seek our input, push us to improve and grow. They thrive because we thrive. They let us be a part of the world outside of prison. We get to contribute and benefit thousands of companies. We help these clients grow, we help their salespeople make money so that they care for their families. Our clients use us because time and again we prove ourselves to be hands-down, the best sales support service they can find. It's really our only way to still have some kind of meaningful connection to the world outside, even if it's the business world. Besides, if this program didn't exist to allow us to perform these functions, these jobs wouldn't exist in the U.S. anyways. They'd be off-shored to the Philippines or India. You can't get the level of caller we can provide for the price we provide it using other labor resources in the U.S.

If you assume that we are exploited because they profit while we aren't paid what you think we should be, then you are deliberately ignoring the value of the entire program just so you can make the case for your own agenda. The non-monetary value of the benefits and opportunities we get from this more than pays whatever gap you believe exists in our wages. Besides, most business managers know that what an employee is paid rarely resides at the top of the list when employees have gripes with employers. Survey after survey of workforces arrive at the same result: employees want to have input, ownership, buy-in, feel valued, and have a chance to grow and develop. All of these rank significantly more than wanting higher pay. We get that here in spades, and in a place where the intrinsic value of these things is exponentially more meaningful.

The greatest part of this program is that there's no limits on how far you can take it, both professionally and personally. I volunteered to work in the call center all those years ago just to make a few bucks and do something other than sit in a cell all day. I wouldn't have even joined if I didn't have a cellmate who recruited me. What that inauspicious beginning brought me to is nothing less than a complete and wholesale transformation of who I am as a person.

I came to prison for a shootout with the police after a bank robbery gone wrong. That's not a starter-crime, folks. I was the worst version of myself that I could possibly be. I was angry, bitter, resentful – I wanted to watch the world burn. I hurt people. I destroyed lives. I did it regularly, and had been doing so for quite some time. I had no prospects in life that led to a better future.

When I came to prison, that bitterness was amplified during my first couple years before the call center. The daunting thought of all the time I had to serve, nothing to do every day, and the corrosive and toxic nature of the prison environment... I was on my way to becoming something even worse. And if I hadn't joined this program, this unique chance at something better, that's exactly what I would have become. There was nothing else for me here. I would have spent 20

years making myself a worse person. Upon release, what do you think I would have gone back to? I have no family support; there was nothing waiting for me out there. Released upon society, I would have gone back to the only thing I've known. I would have hurt more people, destroyed more lives.

All that changed because of this program. The call center staff may have the primary goal of developing work-skills for post-release employment, but they and their environment inadvertently do so much more. By allowing people like me to be a part of something like this, something that lets me feel valued, something that gives me purpose and meaning, something that lets me do for others they allowed the seed to be planted in me that grew into a passionate desire to be the best version of myself I could be. I couldn't help but change. This place is infectious. The encouragement, the motivation, the positivity, the opportunities provided – its nurtured something in me that nothing else in my life has. Coupled with the amount of mentoring I have received, the education and training I've been given, it's stoked a fire in me that roars to this day.

I absolutely, unequivocally love what I do and who it's led me to become. They opportunity I have to be able help other people, both in business and my coworkers personally – it's intoxicating like nothing I've ever been a part of. I wake every day with the foundation of my purpose focused on being the absolute best version of myself that I can be so that I can help others do the same. That grew from the seed this program planted, and it will be with me for the rest of my life.

Because of this, when I walk out of here I am walking into an amazing future. What's waiting for me is nothing short of miraculous for someone who has travelled the path I did to get here. I now have a place to go when I get out. I have a career with a company I absolutely love under the guidance of a man who has done more to make me the man I am now than any other person. I have a chance to make more money than I rightly deserve. And, my overriding goal in life is to use these opportunities to do the same thing for others that the staff in this program have done for me.

So, when you look at me, if you see someone being taken advantage of or exploited, you're just choosing to be blind to reality so you can support your own agenda. The truth is, I'm the one doing the exploiting. I've taken full advantage of the opportunity this program and the wonderful people involved provide, and used it to turn my life around so that I can be more than I ever had the ability to be on any other path.

This program - by what it' done for me - makes the world a better place because it changes people like me and gives us a genuine chance at a better life, and allows us to help make other's lives better. Who can put a price on that or measure that by wages? To do away with these programs based on what I'm paid would eliminate any chance someone in my position would have at a better life. It would literally make the world a worse place. Shame on anyone whose agenda can be okay with that outcome.

Sincerely,
Jason
Business Development
SRCI OCE Call Center - Demand Lead Generation