

Making right from wrong

Fariborz Pakseresht, the new director of the Oregon Youth Authority, on what's working – and what's not – in the world of corrections for kids

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In small, dormitory-like facilities across Oregon, the Oregon Youth Authority, or OYA, has direct custody of approximately 750 youth between the ages of 12 and 25, and supervises an additional 1,000 youth on parole and probation in their communities. As the state agency in charge of the state's juvenile justice system, OYA is the gatekeeper for thousands of troubled and disadvantaged young adults each year, and its new director, Fariborz Pakseresht, oversees it all.

Pakseresht first started working for the authority in 2008. Prior to that, he worked for the Department of Human Services and the Department of Administrative Services in a variety of leadership and administrative roles.

Pakseresht has developed a reputation for promoting government efficiency and transparency. He is also a member of the powerful Public Employees' Benefit Board (PEBB), a group that decide the health plans for Oregon's state employees.

Pakseresht can talk numbers and data in the same breath that he talks about the stunning transformations he sees youth make while they are in the OYA's custody. "Part of what creates an anchor for me in this organization is hearing the stories of youth who have made transformation in their lives," he says.

Amanda Waldroupe: *What causes youth to enter the corrections system?*

Fariborz Pakseresht: You can look at the causes, and you can look at the symptoms. Clearly, the cause of them entering the system is a crime they have committed. If you dig deeper through the roots of those causes, some disturbing statistics emerge. Most of them are coming from families with drug and alcohol issues. A large majority – 74 percent of females and 62 percent of males – have been diagnosed with mental health disorders. Many are victims of sexual abuse – 40 percent of females—and in many cases, by their own family members. Sixteen percent of females and 12 percent of males are already the biological parent of a child. None of these are excuses for committing the crimes they have committed. But it is a point to be aware that many of these youth ... were victims, who in the process created their own victims.

A.W: *Are minority populations overrepresented in the Oregon Youth Authority?*

F.P.: We have a huge overrepresentation of minority youth, particularly with the Native American and Hispanic population.

A.W: *As you've said, there are a lot of factors that influence a youth's crime that have nothing to do with the youth, such as their family environment and their socio-economic status.*

F.P.: Crime victims are very sensitive about this topic. Just because these youth have had a pretty tough background, again, does not justify the crime they have committed. But that question ... is a very substantive and critical question. If the Oregon Youth Authority focuses on its own

world, which is youth ages 12 to 25, we are missing whatever happens prior to age 12 that could have a significant impact on the youth in the system. And if we don't focus on youth after 25, we are missing so many factors that could cause them to go to DOC (the Department of Corrections). You can see the patterns. Their uncles are in DOC. Their parents have been in OYA.

A.W: *How does OYA help youth find their path?*

F.P.: When the youth come into our system, they go through an extensive (physical and mental) evaluation process. A lot of these kids have very poor hygiene. It is not inconceivable that this may be their first dental exam that they've ever had. Their nutrition and physical health is not what it needs to be.

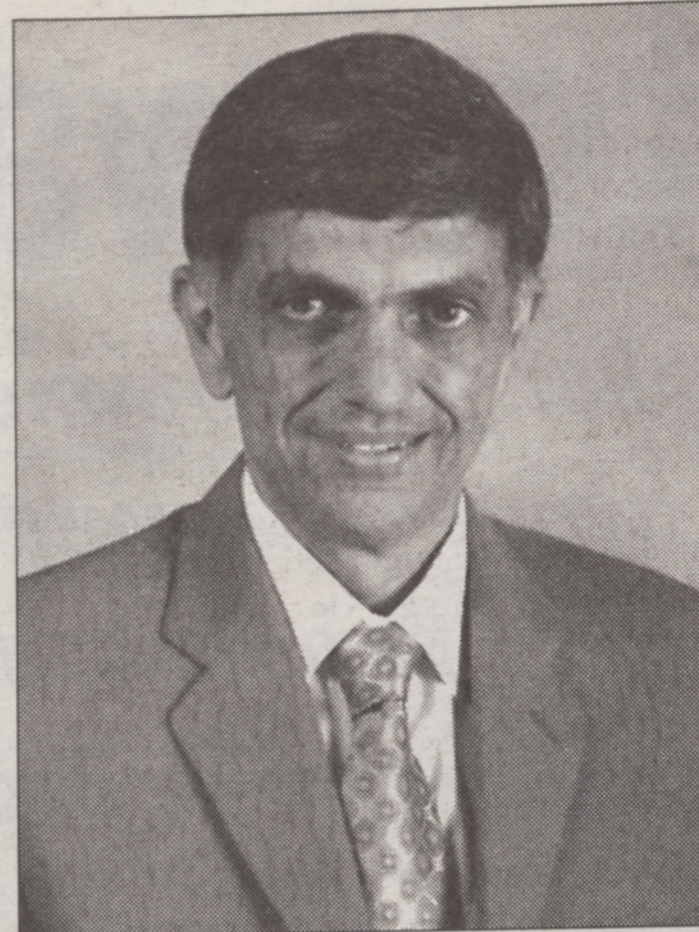
Depending on the crime they have committed, there are various curriculums. This is how Oregon differs from the other states. This is not a typical correctional setting. This is not child welfare. This is a clear treatment and reformation system in a correctional setting. They go to school every day, no matter what. If a youth is coming to us for a sexual offense, there is a sexual offender curriculum. There is an arson curriculum. For violent crimes, there is an aggression replacement therapy.

To the extent possible, we try to partner with the community. We actually started a huge garden at McClaren last year. They actually grew food that was used for youth in the facility. We just began a conversation with the YMCA in Marion-Polk County around a bike reclamation project, to rebuild

Epiphanies

by j.mccurdy

wide open spaces ... winds that aren't afraid
to race across seas of sand
I miss these things
Open, honest, sweaty smiles, calloused hands and handkerchiefs
and deep belly laughter
oh dear god I miss these things...
right or wrong
black and white
before grey got a chance to play
wry grin and I miss the days when
I still thought I had all the answers
these days I often don't even have the right question
and to be frank
I also
selfishly
miss the lack of insight
into the "my" side of things
you know back in the days
when I could wallow in your sins
instead of addressing my own
I have come to the conclusion
that it was never
your sins that kept me
up at night and wounded
it was, in fact,
my own.



Fariborz Pakseresht

bikes. We have the Pooch Program for abandoned or abused dogs. It's a program that resocializes these dogs, and makes them adoptable. It has really amazing results. The recidivism rate for youth engaged in the program is zero.

A.W: *Why?*

F.P.: Youth that are doing the best have the privilege to go into that program. It allows youth to experience responsibility for another being. It is a dog, but just to care for something other than yourself...there are so many different skills that go into that. Patience. Teaching. Walking slowly, mindfully. All of those things are skill sets that some of these youth can use in their future.

We just started a partnership with Chess for Success. There are so many different things that go into playing chess. Contemplating before making a move. On the surface, chess might be something fun, but what they're really doing is acquiring some pretty deep skill sets that will help them in the future.

A.W: *It sounds like they're kept pretty busy.*

F.P.: Generally, youth get in trouble when they sit around. The more we can keep them busy, and have that busy-ness be meaningful to them...and use that time for self-reflection and self-improvement, they can tap into some pretty powerful sources. The majority of these youth suffer from lack of self-worth and self-confidence. Seeing the result of training a dog, caring for a plant

and seeing the plant grow – that all creates some sort of worth, and ultimately, confidence in these youth that they can do something and be successful.

A.W: *Measure 11, a mandatory minimum sentencing law for violent person-to-person crimes, treats youth committing those crimes as adults. What impact has that had on OYA?*

F.P.: Clearly, if you look at the makeup of the system today versus before Measure 11, you are seeing many older youth in our system. Many states don't keep youth in the youth correctional system past the age of 18. We keep them until 25. Generally, what happens is that the older youth need different types of programming. For example, what would help them is vocational training, so they can go to college.

A.W: *Typically, when we think of a corrections facility for adults, we think of them – essentially – in a very punitive environment where they're behind a cell for many hours of the day. Clearly, with the OYA it's different. Why is it important for youth and adults to be in different corrective settings?*

F.P.: When we talk about corrections, it has primarily become a warehousing environment. But it is not true correction. If you're talking about correcting behavior, you have to talk about evidence-based treatment. We don't have any mega facilities. We have smaller living units. Youth live in a dormitory environment. Education and treatment is a major part of their lives. The (likelihood) of change is much greater before age 25 than it is after age 25. The brain is still developing until age 22.

I visited our only female facility in Albany, and met a young woman, Bethany. She wrote poems, and wanted to read some of her poems to me. Her crime was robbery and arson. She engaged in self harm—you could see that her arm was all cut up. She was overweight and was on multiple psychotropic drugs. Probably five months later, (staff) told me I would not recognize her. Jane Goodall had come to visit Portland, and she actually spent some time with the youth (in Albany). Somehow, she became an inspiration for Bethany. She had lost 35 pounds. She looked totally different. She had gotten off all her medications, and she was giving me a lecture about how exercise can produce endorphins that can replace the medications. She has a plan to get a PhD and work for the Jane Goodall Institute. You just never know what spark activates that passion in youth.

A.W: *Gov. John Kitzhaber has established a commission that is looking into changing the state's sentencing standards. What would you like to see happen?*

F.P.: This agency, like many other state agencies, can't really have a position on Measure 11. (But) changes in sentencing can impact the Youth Authority. What we can do is provide data. If a youth is now 22 and he has completed all of his treatment, and he is a Department of Corrections youth, and he is going to be with us for three years, and two years at DOC, I have to ask the question: are we helping this youth by sending him to DOC, or are we hurting him? Data and research tells us that sending this youth increases his chance of recidivism by 100 percent.

A.W: *What would you like to accomplish during your time as executive director?*

F.P.: My vision for the Oregon Youth Authority ... is to get to a world of juvenile justice where the youth who come into the system are exactly the youth that should be in the system, and that they are assessed appropriately, and matched with the best environment for that reformation, and right unit, with the right type of programming, and that we keep them for the exactly right length of stay and not a day longer. When they go back to the community, they have the skills they need...to become productive members of our society, and have found meaning in their lives.