

Plan for second women's prison bad idea for Oregon

BY SHANNON WIGHT
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

At the end of September, the Emergency Board of the Oregon State Legislature will consider a request from the Department of Corrections (DOC) for nearly \$10 million to open a second prison for women in Oregon. This decision would sidestep several rehabilitative programs already in place, overburden the state's budget, and send Oregon retreating from the progress we've made away from over-incarceration.

Since 2007, the rate of men going to prison in Oregon has increased just over 2 percent, while the rate for women has increased a shocking 22 percent. In addition to their high rate of incarceration, women in Oregon's prison are more likely to be there for drug and property crimes (rather than violent offenses) than men. In 2015, nearly 70 percent of women sent to prison were convicted of drug or property crimes.

The DOC is under pressure to open a second prison because the Coffee Creek Correction Facility for Women, Oregon's only women's prison, is over capacity, which is detrimental to both the women incarcerated there and the correctional staff who work there. To accommodate the population, women are "double-bunked" and recreational spaces are used as dorms instead of for programming that increases their likelihood of successfully re-entering our communities. All of these factors create safety risks for everyone.

Unfortunately, DOC has only one tool to



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

address the overcrowding: open more prison beds. There are others in government, however, who could make better decisions. Prosecutors and legislators hold the power to make a different choice about how Oregon spends \$10 million on women convicted of crime.

District attorneys make individual sentencing decisions every day, and with the prison population over capacity by approximately 20 beds, they could hold women accountable by immediately diverting them into programs that would better support their long-term success. This move alone would improve outcomes while also averting the need to open another prison for women.

In the longer term, legislators can prepare to pass much-needed sentencing reforms during the 2017 legislative session. It's more critical than ever to fund programs that address the issues that often underlie women's incarceration such as

addiction, mental illness, and domestic abuse, which would be key in addressing Oregon's growing rate of incarceration.

Over the past few legislative sessions, Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ) has helped lead efforts to responsibly reduce the number of people going to prison and invest those savings into local communities for preventive programs and services including addiction and mental health treatment, housing, and victims' services. Due to the sausage-making nature of passing legislation, none of these efforts has gone as far as needed.

In 2017, PSJ will be asking legislators to expand two existing pieces of legislation that can help decrease the number of women going to prison and increase their likelihood to succeed in the future.

First is an expansion of the Family Sentencing Alternative, a policy passed in 2015 that helps keep parents and children together by giving prison-bound parents an opportunity for assessment to determine if they qualify to receive intensive supervision and services while remaining united with their children.

Second is expanding short-term transitional leave, which originally passed in 2013. This program is a collaboration between state and local correctional agencies that incentivizes good behavior in prison and provides additional support for transition from prison back to the community.

When the session begins in February, legislators should work to pass legislation and fund community-based programs that

will not only reduce the need for a new prison, but help create more successful individuals and safer and stronger communities.

For now, though, we must look to county prosecutors to avoid this unnecessary state expense. Due to mandatory sentencing laws in Oregon, prosecutors have almost absolute control over who goes to prison and for how long. Instead of spending millions to open a new prison for women, legislators should be asking prosecutors to find more appropriate ways to sanction and support women who would otherwise go to prison when other approaches to accountability are more effective.

Opening a new prison will not lower the rates of non-violent crimes, nor will it reduce the number of people affected by such crimes. We know that the most effective approaches to crime involve accountability, treatment and services to help people chart new and successful paths. Helping our community means investing in such programs, not incarcerating more women for non-violent offenses.

In September, legislators on the Emergency Board should deny DOC's request to open another prison for women. Instead, they should ask district attorneys to divert some of the 70 percent of women going to prison for non-violent crimes into more appropriate supervision and services, and they should support increased funding for those services that bring the outcomes we expect from an effective public safety system.




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