

Stick to harmful, regressive prison policy? Or embrace hope?

BY SHANNON WIGHT
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The 2017 presidential election and the uncertainty it's caused make it imperative that we work in our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities to ensure that our own lives reflect the world we want to live in.

As Oregonians, we now face a choice about how we build that world. Our elected officials will soon decide whether to open a second prison for women or invest in other forms of accountability and

services that strengthen rather than tear apart families and communities. This choice is a fork in the road of our values, and our decision will reveal whether Oregon is a beacon of hope or whether we're regressing back to a darker era of criminal justice policies.

The 1980s ushered in the massive buildup of prisons and jails as a result of failures in public safety and mental health policies. The war on drugs played a significant role in prison expansion that deeply targeted communities of color. Even with the growing awareness of the devastating impact of disparity in our justice system, African-Americans continued to be overrepresented in drug possession convictions during 2015 despite the fact that usage amongst ethnic groups is the same.

Our criminal justice system also reflects our failed mental health policies. During the 1960s, in recognition of the harmful impact of institutionalization on the mentally ill, large mental health institutions were closed in favor of more effective and humane community-based programs. That would have been a promising step in the right direction except the funding for the smaller programs never materialized to meet the need. As a result, prisons are

often the largest mental health "providers" in Oregon and across the U.S.

This background is important to remember because it helps us understand some of the context in the lives of people who are filling our prisons and jails. Oregonians who battle mental health and drug addiction continue to have their needs responded to with incarceration rather than treatment.

Now our choice is whether we retrace our history by continuing to imprison the conditions we wish didn't exist or whether we move to a future that builds the system we need for Oregon's health, safety and strength.

The Oregon Legislature convenes for the 2017 session on Feb. 1. Lawmakers will juggle this decision while teetering the brink of having to open a second prison for women at a cost of nearly \$20 million during a \$1.7 billion deficit.

The threat of this prison is deeply rooted in the racist policies of the drug war and our failure to support those with mental illness. Native American and African-American women are disproportionately represented in our population of female prisoners. The vast majority of incarcerated women have substance abuse issues as well as histories of physical and sexual abuse. The vast majority have mental health conditions. And the vast majority are incarcerated for drug and property offenses.

Just when the nation began to wake up to the tragedy of over-incarceration, Oregon passed Ballot Measure 57 in 2008. M57 increased sentences for certain drug and property crimes, and since women are more likely to engage in these than other crimes, they have seen the greatest rate of increase in incarceration rates.

Incarceration policies disproportionately impact people with mental health and addiction issues, but they impact others as well. Most of the women in prison are mothers and primary caregivers to their children. Families, neighborhoods and

communities are torn apart when we rely on incarceration instead of other forms of accountability and services.

What if mothers didn't have to go to a prison that was far away from her children and community? What if there were residential and community-based treatment services that could address the real needs of the person who committed a crime; one that kept her close to her family where she can gain the hope and strength to rebuild her life?

Oregon is a state where we can make this happen. In 2008, we started down the wrong path of increasing sentences for drug and property crimes. That path was out of sync with a growing recognition across the aisle that incarceration for addiction driven crimes was a very expensive and ineffective revolving door.

During the 2017 legislative session, Oregon can either be a beacon of hope or a signal that we have indeed turned to a darker era. Opening a second prison for women, when so many currently there could more effectively be held accountable and treated with much-needed services, would demonstrate our inability to move past tough-on-crime and fear-based rhetoric to do what we know is best for our state.

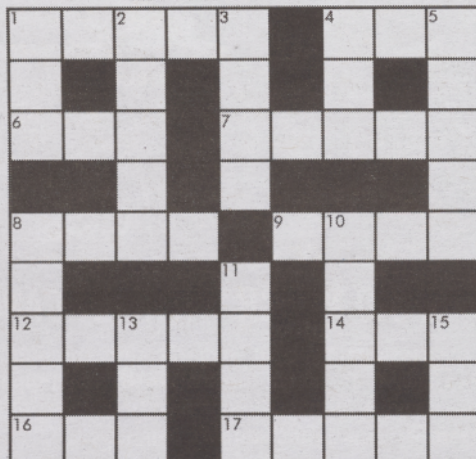
Instead, we can choose to be a signal to the rest of the country that progress is still moving forward. We can choose anti-racist policies that strengthen our community and families by not opening that prison and instead invest in the services and accountability that can heal. We can choose to reflect the world we want to live in.

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Shannon Wight is the deputy director at Partnership for Safety and Justice, a statewide nonprofit advocacy organization advancing public safety solutions that ensure justice, equity, accountability and healing to achieve safe and strong communities.

VOODOO DOUGHNUT CROSSWORD PUZZLE



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ACROSS

1. Fermentation agent
4. Have a bite
6. Tree fluid
7. Cake ingredient
8. Three-ply cookie
9. Hook's henchman
12. Ground grain
14. The gift of ___
16. Tease or ridicule
17. Francis or Kevin?

DOWN

1. Affirmative!
2. Type of fritter
3. Analyze or try
4. Cake ingredient
5. Tres
8. Deal
10. Potter's practice
11. Nosh!
13. Late rapper; abbr.
15. ___ appétit



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