

'Heart-wrenching'

'I've never seen kids in a setting or environment like this,' Disability Rights Oregon's Sarah Radcliffe says of youth detention conditions at NORCOR

BY THACHER SCHMID
STAFF WRITER

Kids disciplined for leaving an orange pip on the floor, falling asleep, using a tissue as a bookmark or "being needy."

Kids locked up for more than a year while awaiting trial. Native American youths detained at almost twice the rate of white youths, and kept much longer.

Kids for whom a caseworker is the "only adult in my life that I trust," yet can't remember her name so they have no one to talk to.

Kids who aren't allowed to touch a doorknob.

This might sound like "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" or the Indian boarding schools of the late 1800s. But this is The Dalles today, according to the findings of an investigation by Disability Rights Oregon.

Street Roots spoke to Disability Rights Oregon attorney Sarah Radcliffe about the advocacy organization's recently released investigation and its new report describing "inhumane" conditions for youths incarcerated at the Northern Oregon Regional Correctional Facilities's juvenile detention. Radcliffe hopes Oregonians support the creation of a Children's Cabinet described in a task force's recommendations, an interagency umbrella that "would make sure that all child-serving services commit to a core set of principles."

Thacher Schmid: *NORCOR has been making headlines for its holding of federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainees. Your report notes Disability Rights Oregon made a "spontaneous" decision to investigate it. What inspired that?*

Sarah Radcliffe: Over the past 2 1/2 years, we've been conducting monitoring visits to jails around the state, and we create that itinerary partly based on covering the geographic areas, making sure we visit places that we haven't been to in a while, and partly based on complaints we receive or coverage that we see in the news. NORCOR rose to the top of that list not for any particular concern, and when I was out there to see the adult side, I just thought, well, there's an adjacent juvenile program; let's have a look over there. And when we went into the juvenile program, it was immediately apparent that conditions in that facility were just not right, and potentially detrimental for kids.

T.S.: *Tell us about a case study from your investigation.*

S.R.: There was one girl, we actually interviewed her on three occasions, because she was there on each of our visits. She struck me as a really sweet kid, and in her NORCOR records, staff noted all over the place that she was respectful, helpful, polite, doing excellent work in school, and yet she was disciplined for multiple weeks for things like falling asleep, even after spending hours in her room with no entertainment other than the Bible, for using a piece of clean

tissue as a bookmark, for leaving an orange seed on the floor, for "being needy." That's a category that we saw written in multiple records for multiple kids, no explanation, just "needy." Or things like doing the minimum, doing just OK, flirting, hands above waist, not saying excuse me. So her story really illustrated a kid who was really desperate to find some human connection, a positive path forward, and yet she was being subjected to such harsh conditions.

There's also another girl – we spoke to her right when

she had only arrived a day and a half before. She was still kind of reeling, just the experience of being in jail for the first time, and the stuff at home that had led up to the incarceration, and she hadn't been removed yet from the kind of post-booking lockdown. So you have to take this test, and then you have to have people approved on your call list by your probation officer, and she didn't have anyone approved on her list. She was like, "I wish I could just call my (Department of Human Services) caseworker, because I really like her and I wish I had someone to talk to." And I said, "Well, can you tell me her name? I'll ask the administration if they could let you make a phone call." And she was like, "You know, I don't even remember her name. That's the saddest thing. She's the only adult in my life that I trust, and I don't even know her name." That, for me, just really illustrated how desperate these kids are for a positive, trusted adult figure in their lives.

T.S.: *Why is Oregon's youth incarceration rate the second highest in the nation?*

S.R.: I do think that when you go into jails, adult's or children's jails, I think what you see points to failures in our social safety net. So when you look at kids who are in jail, you see a lot of crossover between the population of kids in the child welfare system and those in the juvenile justice

ONLINE

What's the problem with NORCOR? Lawsuits, political resistance, immigrant rights and the state's sanctuary law are forming a perfect storm over the Northern Oregon Regional Corrections Facilities. Read Street Roots' previous coverage at news.streetroots.org/norcor

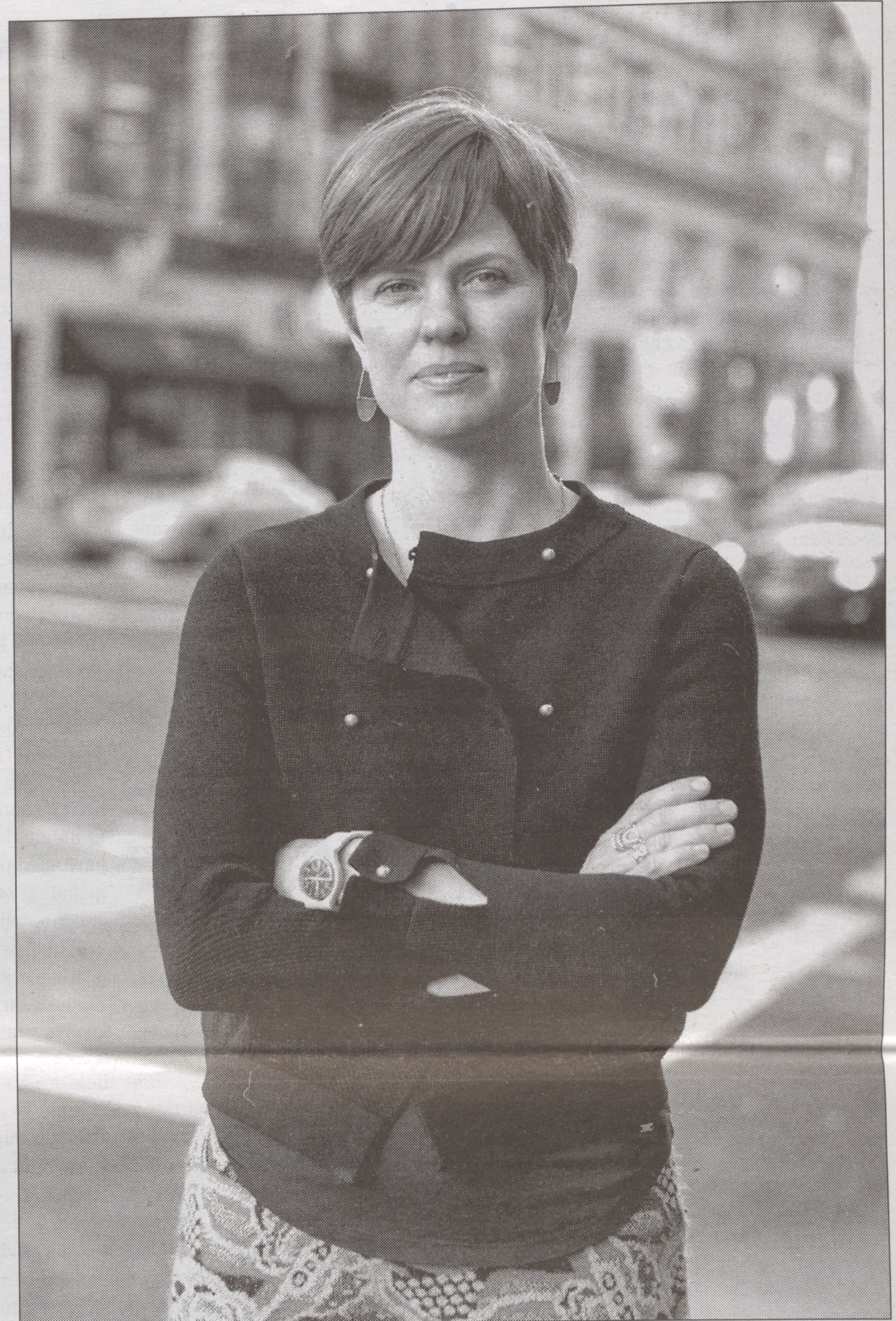


PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Sarah Radcliffe is an attorney with Disability Rights Oregon.

system. So my sense of it is that Oregon's child incarceration rate reflects failures in our child welfare system, our behavioral health system, and those kind of social safety net programs.

T.S.: *Can you give us a few highlights of the report?*

S.R.: There are two basic concerns. The first is a statewide concern: Oregon incarcerates way too many kids. We've got the second-highest rate of child incarceration in the country. And that's an issue that's reflected statewide, but especially at NORCOR, the lengths of stay are shockingly long. Kids are spending on average 29 days in jail for a technical probation violation. Nobody would argue that that's an appropriate sanction for a technical probation violation, and that's clearly pointing to failures in how our juvenile justice system is working. We know that incarceration for kids is hugely disruptive to their education and to their home life, and we also know that jail for kids is not an effective crime deterrent, the experience of being in jail is actually linked to future, deeper involvement in the criminal justice system. So it has the

opposite of the desired effect.

But not only do we incarcerate too many kids; we confine them in facilities that lack oversight and accountability. That means that at NORCOR a program has been allowed to continue for decades that is really psychologically harmful to kids. There are 62 rules that prohibit normal and inevitable human behavior: things like looking around, looking out of a window, asking what time it is, talking, putting your hands above your waist. And then when kids violate those rules, which inevitably they do, they're subjected to conditions that we believe amount to solitary confinement. They're locked in their cells with nothing but the Bible for hours on end, they're denied visits and phone calls to family, they're required to eat their meals alone in their cells, and they exercise and receive education on a solitary basis.

T.S.: *You're an attorney, so your focus and experience presumably tend toward the legal and logical. Did this investigation and report hit you hard emotionally?*

S.R.: I haven't spent time in a juvenile

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