

Bill would force addiction-services commission to 'do something'

Rep. Tawna Sanchez is sponsoring legislation to make an inert government body do its job

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In 2009, Oregon legislators created the Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission and gave it one job: create a plan for improving the state's publicly funded substance abuse programs, then deliver that plan back to the Legislature.

Nearly nine years later, the commission hasn't even begun to write that plan.

That's why on Feb. 5, Rep. Tawna Sanchez (D-Portland) introduced House Bill 4137 to force the commission to do its job by setting a deadline for getting its plan on paper.

Sanchez's bill would require the commission to deliver its first plan to lawmakers by Sept. 15, and then complete a review and update of the plan each year thereafter by the same date.

The Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission, which has failed to meet quorum requirements repeatedly in recent years, is in the process of regrouping under the guidance of its new executive director, Rem Nivens, who took the helm in July.

The commission also underwent changes in 2015 when the Legislature decided its 12 to 16 voting members should be governor-appointed stakeholders rather than agency heads. There must be eight voting members present to constitute a quorum.

Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Eric Bloch now chairs the commission as a non-voting member, and voting members include Lane Borg, executive director of Metropolitan Public Defenders; Washington County Sheriff Pat Garrett; Wasco County District Attorney Eric Nisley; Nate Gaoiran, director of Josephine County Community Corrections; and drug and alcohol treatment providers, nonprofit directors, a physician, a psychiatrist and people in recovery.

Sanchez told Street Roots she recognizes that her bill would not give the commission much time to put together a comprehensive plan from scratch. But, she said, it will force the commission to "do something" this year.

In advocating for the commission's creation in 2009, Oregon's then-attorney general, John Kroger, told the Legislature that drug and alcohol use was

the primary driver of crime in the state. He said that while treatment programs could help people with substance abuse issues, there were problems with the overall framework in which those programs existed. Outcomes weren't always tracked, there was little communication between state agencies, and too often there was no access to treatment for those seeking it.

But, Kroger argued, if Oregon were able to improve and expand its drug and alcohol treatment and prevention programs, it would drastically reduce state spending on health care, law enforcement, corrections and child welfare in addition to lowering the crime rate. He said he believed this new commission could serve as "a powerful tool" in driving system-wide improvements.

The idea behind the commission was simple: This new body of governor-appointed commissioners would build upon the work of its predecessor, the Governor's Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs.

That council had concluded its mission with the release of a 2008 report that claimed to serve as the most comprehensive look at Oregon's addictions services to date.

The report, "Oregon Speaks: Community Addiction Services Investment Strategy," included tools for funding the expansion of treatment services and a seven-year plan for vastly improving access to treatment and evidence-based prevention programs across the state.

It was a solid starting point for the new commission charged with creating pathways toward implementation. But in the years since, the commission has failed to make any progress.

Meanwhile, the number of people in Oregon with a substance abuse disorder has increased from 258,000 in 2006 to more than 400,000 in 2017, according to data from the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health compared with a recent report from the Oregon Substance Use Disorder Research Committee.

This past year, a statewide coalition of people in recovery from substance dependency and their allies emerged with the goal of transforming Oregon's alcohol and drug prevention, treatment and recovery services.

It was this coalition, called Oregon Recovers, that brought the failure of Oregon's Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission to the attention of Sanchez in the form of the bill she's sponsoring in this year's short session.

Oregon Recovers sees the fulfillment of the Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission's mission as an instrumental first step in improving Oregon's drug and alcohol treatment systems.

This is because the commission already has the authority to coordinate state agencies that are combatting addiction in isolation from each other, and it can serve as a single point of accountability for what is a multifaceted and complex system of programs and access points.

Leadership at Oregon Recovers acknowledges the commission wasn't given adequate tools for such a massive undertaking and has included provisions in the bill that would help the commission fulfill its obligation.

While today the only paid position at the commission is its full-time director, the bill would give that director power to appoint paid employees of the commission, and the powers necessary to carry out the duties of the commission.

The bill would also require Oregon Health Authority to deliver a report on the scope of substance abuse within the state, along with the availability of prevention, treatment and recovery services to residents — on Nov. 15 of each

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Tawna Sanchez



Oregon State Capitol