

Gov. Kotek’s panel makes hundreds of recommendations to reform Coffee Creek prison

Advocates on the governor’s panel are unsatisfied with the results so far as the group’s work plods along

BY **BEN BOTKIN** - AUGUST 13, 2024 5:45 AM



📷 The outside of Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville on Friday, Aug. 18, 2023. The facility is Oregon’s only women’s prison. (Ben Botkin/Oregon Capital Chronicle)

Oregon Department of Corrections officials have received hundreds of ideas from a governor-appointed panel for reforming the state’s only women’s prison and better protecting women against trauma, sexual abuse and misconduct.

The recommendations would make administrators more accountable for Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, which houses about 900 female inmates, and seek a change in culture at the Wilsonville prison. They would also increase oversight of allegations of sexual assault and strip searches and expand behavioral health programs, records obtained by the Capital Chronicle show.

The agency is reviewing most of the ideas, but has committed to a handful, such as expanded peer programs to help women train to become mentors, body scanners to reduce strip searches and others. The panel behind the recommendations was created by Gov. Tina Kotek nearly a year ago after a [state-commissioned report](#) found rampant problems at Coffee Creek, such as a culture of retaliation that discourages staff and inmates alike from reporting sexual misconduct.

The 20-member advisory panel, primarily made up of advocates and state officials, continues to meet with Kotek’s staff and the list is not a final set of recommendations. Critics want changes at Coffee Creek, and some advocates on the panel have [publicly complained](#) that the committee’s work may not lead to meaningful reforms.

Since the committee started to meet behind closed doors, the prison has had high-profile problems, including a woman released nearly [two years late](#) and [backlogged medical care](#).

Bobbin Singh, executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, which has two staffers on the committee, said that legislation is needed to reform the system.

“Unless the Oregon Department of Corrections has clear statutory mandates, nothing will really change,” he said. “From our perspective, it’s a little embarrassing that these are the recommendations that DOC is looking at right now.”

Corrections agency reviews recommendations

Amber Campbell, a spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Corrections, said the agency is reviewing the recommendations.

“This work and review of the hundreds of recommendations will be ongoing,” Campbell said in an email.

The agency has committed to supporting some changes, Campbell said. Those include establishing a full-time sexual assault liaison and convening an oversight board to review audit findings related to the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act, she said.

Other changes include:

- Procuring body scanners to eliminate or reduce the need for unclothed strip searches,
- Expanding visitation policy so more children and family members are eligible to visit, and
- Expanding a peer recovery support program that allows inmates to train and certify as peer mentors who help people through their life experiences.

The agency also will request the expansion of a contracted with a provider that offers counseling, advocacy and support services for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. And Campbell said officials are making other changes, like establishing four annual family events and making behavioral health services staff available after hours to respond to crises.

The corrections agency and the governor’s office declined to provide a timeline or say how long the review process will take.

Anca Matica, a spokesperson for Kotek’s office, said the governor and agency have a “preliminary agreement” to support certain recommendations and will call on lawmakers to approve “targeted investments” in the 2025 legislative session.

Wider recommendations

The committee’s ideas are wider than what the agency has committed to so far. For example, it has recommended that prison officials enact monitoring to flag staffers who have potential misconduct issues and create a public dashboard with data about sexual assault cases. The panel also called for training on transgender, nonbinary and gender diverse people for agency staff members and the enactment of policies on gender diversity.

Another idea: explore options for free phone or video visits for inmates to enable them to have more outside communication. And the panel called for the prison to set up a system so that women can schedule medical appointments before release.

Singh expressed frustration that the governor’s office is not taking a more vigorous approach.

“What we’re seeing really is this delegation or this sort of lack of ownership of this and just giving it to the agency to have the final say in all of this,” he said. “It seems like a very odd way of fixing such a profound problem.”