

Governor’s women’s prison committee members unhappy with lack of progress

Gov. Tina Kotek’s office declined to answer multiple questions about the group and members’ concerns that nothing will change

BY BEN BOTKIN - JULY 29, 2024 6:10 AM



Advocates are frustrated about the lack of progress on Gov. Tina Kotek's advisory committee for reforms to Oregon's women's prison. (Getty Images)

Nearly a year ago, Gov. Tina Kotek formed an advisory panel to recommend how to improve poor conditions at Oregon’s only women’s prison.

That came in response to a scathing [state report](#) released about Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, which houses about 900 female inmates and opened in 2001. The report, ordered by state lawmakers, found rampant problems and a culture of mistrust, with staff and inmates telling researchers that they fear retaliation for reporting wrongdoing, including sexual misconduct. Women in the prison also reported a host of other problems, like intrusive pat-downs and strip searches and inadequate medical care and mental health care.

Now, after 10 months of meetings, the advocates Kotek tapped to serve on the group are concerned their efforts will not lead to the substantive reform that’s necessary to change the prison’s culture and environment. They also say they are disappointed about inaction from the governor’s office.

The 20-member group, the Governor’s Advisory Panel on Gender Responsive Practices in Corrections, is mostly made up primarily of advocates and state officials. They went to work in September, and at the time, Kotek their work would help bring about necessary change. She promised to support that effort, after calling in August for “urgent action.” Yet some committee participants now say they worry the group’s recommendations will not lead to Kotek backing any meaningful legislative proposals in the 2025 session – which is crucial for a major proposal to pass.

“For us, it’s a matter of supporting fairness, safety and the basic humanity of those in custody,” said Mariana Garcia Medina, a senior policy associate with the ACLU of Oregon. “However, it has been disappointing that we have not seen a clear pathway for this upcoming session despite the already existing recommendations from the report and the conversations with the advisory panel.”

Kotek’s office declined an interview request with Mia Ruston, Kotek’s aide assigned to the committee. In an email, Roxy Mayer, a spokesperson for Kotek’s office, said the work is ongoing but did not answer multiple questions from the Capital Chronicle about whether the governor shares the advocates’ concerns about the need for legislation to hold the corrections agency accountable.

‘Kind of baffled’

Meanwhile, advocates involved in the committee at Kotek’s request are becoming increasingly alarmed that the work has stalled.

This comes after monthly meetings, and workgroups assigned to areas like family connections, medical and mental health services and best practices for transgender people in custody. Committee members have talked to prison staffers, former and current inmates and heard about the ongoing work at Coffee Creek to enact improvements in the short-term, including providing gender-appropriate clothing like sports bras and more recreational and social activities.

The work so far has not led to substantial change, said Bobbin Singh, executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, a nonprofit advocacy group with staff involved in the committee. He said a wide-ranging legislative proposal is needed to ensure reform.

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– Bobbin Singh, executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center

Such a bill would make many changes. Singh said the breadth of changes necessary makes an omnibus bill necessary, pointing out that the state’s report that sparked the committee identifies a host of challenges. The report, for example, recommends revamped staff training, improvements to medical and mental health care and changing policies on grievance handling, and disciplinary practices. The report also called for beefed up staffing to oversee the prison’s compliance with the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act.

Singh said he’s frustrated with the lack of commitment from aides with the governor’s office.

“We’re caught in this ridiculous sort of circle where the governor’s office is articulating that the advocates have to push this, push these responses or push these policies,” he said. “Or that she has to see what these policies are about before she can get behind it. She’s putting the burden on the advocates and not actually taking any responsibility or any ownership of the issue and actually leading on the issue.”

Julia Yoshimoto, director of the Women’s Justice Project at the center, echoed that same frustration.

“We’re all kind of baffled,” she said. “What did the governor’s office think from the beginning, when they pulled all of these people together and asked people to commit this kind of time to it if they were never intending to push for legislation?”

Few answers from governor’s office

Mayer, the governor’s spokesperson, said the advisory panel continues to meet monthly and Kotek supports improvements.

She said the Department of Corrections has received “hundreds of recommendations” from the panel and that the vetting process is still ongoing. She also said department leaders and Coffee Creek staff have played an “active role” in implementing short-term recommendations.

Mayer would not answer multiple questions about the issue. She would not say whether the governor sees a need for legislation and did not answer a question about whether the governor is open to sponsoring such legislation. She also declined to provide examples of ideas and recommendations that are under consideration.

The committee meetings have unfolded behind closed doors, with the public and media barred from hearing the exchange of ideas.

It’s unclear when the panel’s work will finish. Mayer did not answer a question about what timeline and deadlines the group has to complete its work.

Singh said it’s important that the advisory panel’s work not fizzle out, as is common when groups are created in response to systemic problems in government.

“Anytime there’s a report like this and there’s a workgroup or task force created, what we often find is that it is just an effort that is done in order to create cover,” he said. “And usually what happens with these workgroups or task forces is, as time passes, people get less interested, disengaged and eventually it just kind of dissipates. And there’s not really anything that manifests out of these work groups.”

But with Kotek’s formation of the advisory panel – and ongoing problems at Coffee Creek since the panel started its work – that should not be the case, he said.

“She did it in response to what was a very damning report about Coffee Creek,” Singh said. “Since that time, we’ve also had that new [medical audit](#) that’s come out on Coffee Creek. Things are not getting better, based on the conversations that we’ve had with individuals in custody at Coffee Creek. Things continue to get worse and continue to deteriorate.”

Corrections agency weighs in

After the state report came out, Kotek ordered the corrections agency to make short-term changes while the panel’s work proceeds.

In response, the prison has restarted town hall meetings for inmates to talk to staff and share ideas. Its also added activities like yoga classes and a quilting program and procured sports bras for women, according to a [May report](#).

The prison has loosened its policies when inmates are punished so in most cases, they can continue to have access to phones and tablets to visit family when they lose other privileges. Other work is ongoing, like putting more than 400 new security cameras in the facility.

Amber Campbell, a spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Corrections, said the agency continues to work with the panel to answer questions, provide updates and follow through on recommendations after they are prioritized.

Holding out hope

For now, committee members are plodding forward, hoping that Kotek will move on legislation.

Singh said his organization has asked numerous times for a meeting with Kotek to discuss a potential omnibus bill. So far, that’s not happened.

“We will show up and meet anywhere, anytime on any of these issues if we can try to get some meaningful response to happen,” he said.

Asked whether the group’s work could be salvaged with a solid legislative proposal put together for the next session, Garcia Medina, with the ACLU of Oregon, didn’t rule that out.

“It is disappointing, but I still want to say that the governor has the opportunity,” Garcia Medina said.