

Critical new state report finds shortcomings in Oregon’s treatment of incarcerated women

Gov. Tina Kotek calls for immediate actions at Department of Corrections and is planning an advisory panel to map out a strategy

BY BEN BOTKIN - AUGUST 17, 2023 5:31 PM



📷 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)

Gov. Tina Kotek on Thursday ordered the Oregon Department of Corrections to act immediately to improve conditions for female inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility amid the release of a new state-ordered report that detailed hostility and retaliation at the state’s only women’s prison.

Kotek also plans to convene an advisory panel to discuss findings of the [229-page report](#) and enact its recommendations. Kotek has directed the corrections agency to determine immediate actions it can take without additional resources within 60 days. Coffee Creek is a 508,000-square-foot facility, located on 108 acres in Wilsonville with about 870 female inmates.

The report found staff and inmate concerns about retaliation for reporting wrongdoing, including sexual misconduct, and inadequate mental health staffing for inmates on suicide watch. Suicide attempts among women housed at the prison are disproportionately higher than at men’s prisons.

“In the wake of national, systemic shortcomings in meeting the needs of women who are incarcerated, I am resolved to confront these issues head on,” Kotek said in a statement. “The GIPA report was sobering to read. It is incumbent on Oregon’s corrections system to ensure that the use of carceral settings yield the best possible public safety outcomes and set people up for successful re-entry.”

State lawmakers ordered the Gender Informed Practices Assessment report in 2022. It cost nearly \$100,000 and was compiled in part by the Women’s Justice Institute, a Chicago-based advocacy group focused on female incarceration.

‘Sobering’ findings

The report found that Coffee Creek didn’t have enough mental health staff, resulting in incarcerated women being placed on suicide watch and put in isolation without the support of trained mental health staff. In some cases, women were put on suicide watch when it wasn’t clinically necessary due to staff limits.

Coffee Creek had more suicide attempts than any other prison facility in Oregon, with 20 of the 70 suicide attempts in a one-year period coming from Coffee Creek inmates. Women make up 7.5% of the state prison population, but the women’s prison was responsible for 29% of recorded suicide attempts.

Among the wider population outside prisons, women are responsible for more suicide attempts but men are more likely to die by suicide, a difference researchers attribute largely to more men using firearms and women using less effective methods.

Staff and inmates said reporting allegations of sexual misconduct can lead to retaliation, including being placed in segregation or the loss of privileges. Some incarcerated women reported intentionally breaking rules to be removed from an area or job instead of reporting misconduct from a guard or fellow inmate and risking retaliation.

“I broke a rule so I would be taken off that job. I lost time, and it was a good job,” one woman told researchers.

Inmates also reported their grievances are submitted but often rejected and not processed. The report said the prison has a lower number of grievances than other facilities but found that’s not a true count, given the rejected grievances.

When the Capital Chronicle recently requested the number of grievances and complaints filed by Coffee Creek inmates, an agency spokesperson said the agency does “not have a comprehensive tracking system” for those files.

The Oregon Department of Corrections has faced criticism for its [lack of transparency and accountability](#), particularly at Coffee Creek. The Oregon Justice Resource Center, a nonprofit advocacy group, recently released [a report](#) based on interviews at the prison, where women reported harsh conditions and frequent lockdowns.

The center’s executive director, Bobbin Singh, urged Kotek and the agency to listen to people in the system and take “immediate action.”

“Addressing women’s pathways into incarceration is essential to helping them prepare for life after prison and avoid slipping back into habits that will lead them to further contact with the legal system,” Singh said in a statement. “Yet, Oregon Department of Corrections is failing to provide what people need and is squandering opportunities to address trauma, develop new skills, and create a culture that is healing and empowering. Women are chronically overlooked within corrections systems as a rule and this is apparent at CCCF.”

Next steps

The advisory panel will work with the corrections agency on a strategic plan, which will include policy proposals and input from people in the prison, families and others. Its first meeting will be on Sept. 7.

“The Department of Corrections is actively working on next steps to attend to the recommendations in this report,” Acting DOC Director Heidi Steward said in a statement. “Since CCCF’s opening in 2001, research into – and the understanding of – women’s unique needs have evolved, and we look forward to maturing our programs and services.”

Separately, the corrections agency has hired Joan Palmateer, who was the first superintendent at Coffee Creek when it opened to guide improvements. Palmateer retired from the agency in 2008.

She’ll have an estimated seven months on the job, which is estimated to cost about \$82,047 in pay and benefits, the agency said.

Additionally, the agency will review special housing to look for improvements to security practices and hold “listening sessions” for staff, inmates and others, an agency spokesperson said.