

# Oregon's female inmates need support, not another prison (Opinion)



By **Guest Columnist**

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## Tawna Sanchez and Carla Piluso

Oregon's only prison for women is over capacity with more than 120 temporary and emergency beds in use to accommodate the skyrocketing women's prison population, which has quadrupled in the last 20 years. This past summer, the [Oregon Department of Corrections](#) began preparations to open a second women's prison, estimated to cost taxpayers an additional \$17.5 million every biennium.

We joined advocates in calling for an alternative.

Our appeal came from experience. Rep. Carla Piluso worked in law enforcement for 30 years, serving in every rank of the Gresham Police Department including as police chief for six years, when she increased services for survivors of domestic violence and made families safer through effective community-based programs. Rep. Tawna Sanchez has been the director of family services at the Native American Youth and Family Center, working with women and families for more than twenty years. In that role she also has volunteered with women in prison, and developed a nationally recognized wrap-around service model for victims of domestic violence to help women heal and rebuild their lives.

For safe and strong families and communities, we must build on women's resilience, not avoid the hard work of addressing addiction by simply removing them from our sight.

Collectively we have decades of first-hand experience working with women struggling with addiction who cycle in and out of our criminal justice system. We are disheartened that 70 percent of the women incarcerated at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility are held for drug and property crimes generally committed to support addiction. The vast majority are mothers. The vast majority have themselves been victims of physical and/or sexual abuse.

To more effectively respond to this cycle of abuse, addiction and incarceration, we have co-sponsored House Bill 3078, the Safety and Savings Act. It would provide resources to local communities to treat addiction and serve victims rather than cut programs to fund a second prison to warehouse women. For safe and strong families and communities, we must build on women's resilience, not avoid the hard work of addressing addiction by simply removing them from our sight.

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Our collaboration on this bill is significant. As a Native American woman who grew up in Northeast Portland, Sanchez is deeply rooted in the lives of people who are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system. Piluso dedicated her entire career to law enforcement and worked to address the over-representation of communities of color and low-income people in our criminal justice system.

We believe that people who commit crimes need to be held accountable and that law enforcement strategy must increasingly reflect the understanding that simply enforcing laws and putting people behind bars is not the same as creating public safety. We can safely reduce Oregon's excessive sentences for drug and property crimes and reinvest those savings in addiction treatment and services to help people turn their lives around. This is the foundation of the Safety and Savings Act. We believe it deserves the strong support of Oregonians and all elected officials at the Capitol.

*Rep. Tawna Sanchez is a Democrat who represents North and Northeast Portland, and Rep. Carla Piluso is a Democrat who represents Gresham.*

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