

From the
desk of
Representative
Tereza Alonso
Loen

YES ON
HB 3078B

Proposed bill aims to cut Oregon's prison population

By Whitney Woodworth, April 13, 2017

Earlier this month, Elizabeth Hacker's oldest daughter got into Stanford University. She said it was one of the most joyous moments of her life, and not just because her daughter's dream was becoming a reality.

It was because, after being in and out of jail for the two and half years, she was finally reunited with her children.

Like so many women in Oregon, Hacker became caught in a cycle of abusive relationships and addiction that led to her incarceration. It was only with getting sober and using transitional resources to find a job, house and stay clean that she able to get — and stay — on track, she said.

"I feel lucky to have had the treatment and services that I needed, but I'm not more special than anyone else. ... Other women have children and families and hopes and dreams. Other women need help."

Hacker spoke before a House Judiciary Committee Wednesday in favor of House Bill 3078, also known as the 2017 Safety and Savings Act.

Supporters of the proposed bill say the act, which would change sentencing guidelines for property and drug convictions and allow more people into treatment and transitional services, would keep people out of Oregon's crowded prisons.

Opponents denied the claims that state prisons were experiencing an overcrowding crisis and said the bill would undo the progress Oregon has made on reducing crime.



Sponsors of the proposed bill, Rep. Carlá Piluso, D-Gresham, Rep. Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland, and Rep. Ann Lininger, D-Lake Oswego, spoke in support of the bill Wednesday.

"When I arrested women with their children watching, I knew I was altering their lives forever," said Piluso, a former Gresham police chief. "Many of these mothers were in domestic violence situations or struggling with addiction or mental illness."

She attributed these problems to lack of treatment and sentencing laws that created lengthy, expensive prison stays for repeat offenders. The change made in 2008 to implement longer sentences was created to target big-time drug kingpins instead mostly punishes low-level addicts, she said.

"Nothing pains an officer more than to find out that our system isn't addressing the underlying problem, and they'd have to go back and arrest the same woman over and over, or even worse, their children 10 years later," Piluso said.

Linger tearfully recounted her experience watching her young cousin struggle with addiction and the criminal justice system. She urged the committee to approve the bill, saying it was a better and more humane way to treat people with addiction and mental illnesses.

The changes will benefit all qualified inmates, not just women, but it will serve to address the "skyrocketing" female inmate population, supporters said.

According to researchers, the number of women imprisoned in the Oregon Department of Corrections has nearly tripled over the past 20 years even though women are not committing more frequent or serious crimes.

About 70 percent of the more than 1,200 women inside Coffee Creek Correctional Facility are there for drug and property crimes, Wight said. Most have struggled with addiction and mental health. Many are survivors of domestic violence.

Wight said the proposed bill has several different components designed to address the root causes of incarceration and lower recidivism rates. If passed, the bill would preserve the Family Sentencing Alternative, a program passed in 2015 in an effort to keep children and parent offenders together by providing them with intensive supervision and services instead of prison. The proposed bill would also expand the program to include pregnant women and increase the number of counties participating in alternative sentencing.

Defendants being sentenced for person felonies, like assault and armed robbery, and sex crimes would not be eligible for alternative sentencing.

Backers of the bill also want to increase short-term transitional leave from 30 days to 180 days. Wight said expanding the period would allow for more time to help released inmates find housing, employment, and treatment, thus, lowering the chances of them re-

offending and returning to prison.

Officials with the Partnership for Justice and Safety said the state's excessive sentences for drug and property crimes "disproportionately impact women and people of color."

A portion of the proposed bill seeks to undo those "excessive" prison stays by reducing the presumption sentences for certain property crimes and increasing the number of previous convictions—from two to four—allowed before a sentence automatically lengthens.

Intensive treatment is more cost-effective than filling prison cells, Wight said. Realigning drug and property sentencing laws and focusing on rehabilitation will create long- and short-term savings.

Those savings can be used to fund the grossly undermet needs of victim services agencies, she added. The bill would appropriate a set amount to the Oregon Domestic and Sexual Violence Fund, where current funding levels are less than 50 percent of what is minimally required to ensure adequate access to emergency services, according to the Partnership for Justice and Safety.

During his 25 years of criminal activity, Gary Cobb said he was caught in a cycle of crime and heroin addiction.

"Once I got released, I would pick it back up again," he said.

Finally getting into a structured setting and receiving treatment in 2000 pulled him out of the destructive cycle, he said.

Now, 16 years in recovery and a proud homeowner, Cobb works as a community outreach coordinator for Central City Concern to help others experiencing homelessness and poverty.

The act could result in cost-savings, community-based services, addiction treatment and increased family stability, all of which make communities safer and stronger.

"What you end of doing is investing in these folks," he said. "We become taxpayers, and we pay back into the system."

Complete article available at <http://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/crime/2017/04/13/proposed-bill-aims-cut-oregons-prison-population/100291026/>