

January 31, 2022

Chair Rep Janelle Bynum, Vice Chair Ron Noble, Vice Chair Karin Power and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

I am writing as a member of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) of Oregon, Ashland where I serve as Branch Public Policy Chair. I express my strong support for House Bill 4146.

The rate at which women are being incarcerated has greatly increased in the past decade. In fact, women have become the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population. Research consistently shows that incarcerated women face different problems than men — and prisons often make those problems worse.

Women are more likely to enter prison with a history of abuse, trauma and mental health problems. Even in a “secure” prison, incarcerated women face sexual abuse from correctional staff and other prisoners and experience severe psychological distress. Unfortunately, treatment for trauma and mental health problems are often inadequate or unavailable.

Most women in prison are mothers of minor children. These women are more likely than fathers in prison to be the primary caretakers of their children, so the increasing number of women in prisons means more and more family disruption and insecurity. With only one state prison for women, long travel times for family visits means incarcerated women are less likely to have visits with their children. This causes more emotional struggles.

I have been a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer for children in the foster care system. Many of the children I worked with came from families with an incarcerated parent or parents. I know the trauma these children experienced knowing their mother and or father were in jail. Their parent(s) knew of this trauma and felt it too.

Oregon’s understanding of women’s incarceration suffers from the relative scarcity of gender-specific data, analysis, and discourse. As the number of women in prisons and jails continues to rise understanding this dramatic growth becomes more urgent. HB 4146 addresses this issue by designating a corrections gender-responsive coordinator at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility who will create a Gender- Responsive Advisory Council and contract with a third party to conduct an assessment of the facility.

I urge you to vote yes on HB 4146. Thank you for your public service.

Respectfully,

Regina Ayars
Public Policy Chair, Ashland Branch
American Association of University Women of Oregon

