

YWCA IS ON A MISSION

February 1, 2022

Janelle Bynum, Chair
House Judiciary Committee
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Bynum, Vice-Chairs Noble and Power, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I am writing today to express support for HB 4146, a bill that looks to increase dignity for incarcerated women in Oregon by requiring a gender-responsive, trauma informed assessment of Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

The YWCA is one of the oldest and largest women's organizations in the nation, with 2.6 million members across 300 local associations, the YWCA of Greater Portland has been serving Oregonians for over 110 years, while evolving to meet the changing needs of the women we serve. However, our core mission has not changed: eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, dignity and freedom for all. Part of our work includes the Family Preservation Project (FPP), an effort for women incarcerated at CCCF that promotes individual and system level change to reduce the collateral consequences of parental incarceration on children, families, and the community.

Having worked with women inside for almost 20 years, we have seen firsthand the impact on children, families and communities when women are not able to address the conditions that lead them to prison. Too often these conditions involve trauma and abuse. These women then face unique challenges while incarcerated and have re-entry experiences that are exacerbated by the fact that most of them are also mothers that were and still are the primary caregivers for their children.

Simply put, prisons are not resourced to attend to the host of public health matters that we look to them to address.

Mothers can serve as anchors in the community and by better understanding their pathways to prison and how those conditions are being addressed during their incarceration, Oregon will be better equipped to have women return to their communities and families as a source of strength and increase the well-being of their children, families and communities.

Attached you will find some of the considerations that we have reviewed in our support and advocacy of this bill. We ask that you join us in moving this work forward by supporting HB 4146.

Thank you,

Susan A. Stoltenberg

Susan Stoltenberg
Executive Director
YWCA of Greater Portland

eliminating
empowering
ywca
of greater portland

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HB 4146 – Dignity for Incarcerated Women

- **For decades, the voices and experiences of women were not captured in criminal justice research. Most of the research we conducted to understand criminality and what works in criminal justice was conducted with males.**
- This prevented implementation of policies, practices & programs that attend to women's unique experiences and needs.
- Our inattention to the unique experiences and needs of justice-involved women has contributed to troubling increases in their incarceration.
 - The number of women in prison has increased at nearly double the rate of men since 1985 (404% versus 209%).
 - The number of women in the system is rising, yet they pose a lower public safety risk compared to men.
- **Our inattention to the unique experiences and needs of justice-involved women has also exposed them to policies and practices in prison that do not meet their needs and are, in many cases, harmful.** This includes, for example, using classification and assessment tools that have been designed for men – tools that overclassify women and fail to address gender-specific factors. It also includes subjecting women to disciplinary policies, programs, and operational practices that are not gender or trauma informed and cause harm.
- **The past three decades has yielded a vast amount of research on women's pathways into the justice system and the policies and practices that are needed to ensure their successful outcomes and reduce harms. For example:**
 - We now know that alarmingly high numbers of incarcerated women - over 90% - have experienced very serious physical and/or sexual abuse, often beginning when they were young children
 - Many struggle with physical and mental health problems as well as substance abuse issues tied to abuse & trauma
 - Many women commit crimes in the context of relationships, including gender-based violence, and economic hardship
 - Women are far more likely than men in the criminal justice system to be the sole support and caregivers for their children and their incarceration has serious impacts on families and entire communities

- **It is essential that we join other states in responding to this research and implement best and evidence-based practices with incarcerated women. National and international organizations including NIC, SAMHSA, ICPA, and APA, are actively promoting implementation of gender responsive policies and practices for women in the justice system.**
- Too often we are continuing to subject women to interventions and programs that have been based on studies about what works for men can have unintended negative consequences for the women and staff, children and entire communities.
- The evidence is clear: gender responsive approaches improve outcomes. For example, gender responsive assessment tools are more predictive for women and GR programs yield better outcomes than those identified as gender-neutral. Gender responsive staff training increases prison safety. **This bill is essential.**
- **Info about the GIPA**
 - The GIPA has been implemented in over a dozen states and has instigated powerful improvement and partnerships.
 - Example: The State of IL I implemented the GIPA and, since that time, has launched transformative training for staff and cultivated meaningful cross sector partnerships
 - Example: WA state recently embarked on the GIPA process and using it to shape their newly formed Women’s Division and implement gender responsive approaches throughout their women’s prison
- Implementing gender responsive policies and practices is not only important for the women we work with; it is important for staff as well. Staff have been negatively impacted by our inattention to women as well. They report lacking the training, information and support they need to work with women effectively.
- Paying attention to the research on women and using it to improve what we do and how we do it is a “win-win” situation. It improves outcomes with women and improves the lives of the staff that work with them, and creates a stronger justice system. These benefits extend to our children, families and communities.