



## NEW REPORT EXPOSES DECLINE IN PRISON CONDITIONS, SUFFERING OF INCARCERATED OREGONIANS, THAT DEMAND URGENT ATTENTION

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PORTLAND, Ore. – A new report exposes a sharp decline in conditions at Oregon’s only women’s prison as described in dozens of accounts by Adults in Custody (AICs) incarcerated there. “Death by a Thousand Cuts: Stories from Inside Coffee Creek Correctional Facility,” published by the Oregon Justice Resource Center, is based on the Center’s near decade of work with Oregon’s incarcerated women and the many stories shared by those women of life in prison. OJRC has noted the frequency with which people at Coffee Creek (CCCF) are describing a worsened situation since the pandemic and how, despite the lifting of restrictions, in many ways life at CCCF has not improved.

There are numerous examples among the stories featured in the report of inhumane and degrading treatment that is creating unnecessary psychological and even physical pain. One woman experienced a permanent loss of eyesight because she waited so long to receive treatment for macular degeneration. Another had not had any visits in three years because prison authorities had canceled visiting so often and so unpredictably that her friends eventually stopped coming. Yet another described how people had to model shirts and pants for an officer when asking for new clothing which must meet the officer’s subjective assessment as to whether it is “too suggestive” since women have been told that male officers are put in jeopardy if the women’s clothes are too tight.

Among the most serious issues raised by AICs concern suicide attempts and self-harm. One woman shared a story of witnessing another AIC self-harming the day before she completed suicide. Correctional officers responded to her self-harm by trying to strip-search her, ridiculing her and accusing her of just trying to get attention. Another woman told us about seeing cuts on other women from self-harm and about how one AIC had tried to swallow a razor.

Many of those who shared their stories with OJRC report experiencing profound suffering and despair and observing the same in those around them. In general, descriptions of the culture within CCCF can be summed up as degrading, excessively punitive, unpredictable, and harmful to mental and physical health. Black and Indigenous AICs have reported being called racial slurs, being singled out for discipline, and being bullied by staff. They recount having received more unfounded discipline reports, not being selected for programs, and not receiving the same preferential treatment that white AICs do.

“Our report is grounded in years of working with incarcerated Oregonians and features quotes from dozens of people telling of their experiences at CCCF,” said Sarah Bieri, Staff Attorney with the Women’s Justice Project of the OJRC. “What stands out to me is how many long-time incarcerated people are telling us things are reverting. One said, ‘It feels like we have gone

backwards by ten years.’ That goes directly against what the Oregon Department of Corrections tell us they’re trying to do to humanize and normalize life in prison.”

“Treating people in this way is an affront to human dignity and also deeply counter-productive,” said Alice Lundell, Director of Communication for the OJRC. “If the Department of Corrections is serious about fostering rehabilitation among incarcerated people and preparing them for life after prison with a goal of avoiding reoffending this is not the way to do it. What is happening is that many already deeply traumatized women are being subjected to further traumas that puts great strain on their wellbeing and therefore their ability to prepare effectively for reentry.”

OJRC believes prison officials and elected leaders should be held accountable for conditions at Coffee Creek and should prioritize taking immediate steps to reverse the decline.

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**Note to Editors:** The Women’s Justice Project is a program of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, a nonprofit law firm based in Portland and serving clients around Oregon. WJP is the first and only program in Oregon to exclusively address issues related to women in Oregon’s criminal legal system. For nearly ten years, staff have been providing direct legal services and other forms of support to people incarcerated in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. WJP advocates for more just and humane treatment of women in the criminal legal system.