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Five years after outcry over people spending 23 hours a day in cells, Oregon prison improved treatment of inmates with mental illness

Civil rights watchdog applauds progress, while urging an end to overuse of solitary confinement

Portland, Oregon—Today, Oregon’s leading statewide disability rights organization announced the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) had improved conditions for inmates who experience serious mental health conditions at Oregon’s only maximum security prison, the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP). DRO monitored the progress using goals laid out in a 2016 agreement reached with ODOC in the wake of a blistering 2015 investigative report by the watchdog.

While lauding the prison’s progress, Disability Rights Oregon (DRO) urged ODOC to reform the ongoing overuse of solitary confinement. ODOC no longer uses the term “solitary confinement,” but the practice continues under several other names.

“After four years of advocacy, inmates with serious mental illness are being treated more humanely and we’ve made real progress toward providing the behavioral healthcare they need,” said Jake Cornett, executive director of DRO. “Improvements to

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behavioral health care in the corrections system are important, but more must be done to keep people with mental illness out of the criminal justice system in the first place.”

Through its groundbreaking investigation, DRO found that dozens of men who lived in the prison mental health unit were subjected to staff violence and near total isolation, and received inadequate mental healthcare. DRO’s findings reverberated across the state and led ODOC to agree to benchmarks to improve conditions in the specialized unit.

“The Department of Corrections deserves praise for the progress we made in four years, but more must be done to have our correction system reflect Oregon values,” said Tom Stenson, deputy legal director of DRO. “Solitary confinement is profoundly harmful to people with mental illness and must end—no matter what it’s called.”

OSP houses inmates with the most serious mental illnesses in a specialized area called the Behavioral Health Unit (BHU). Roughly 40 men in the BHU are more profoundly impacted by their mental illness than any other individuals in the Oregon correction system. In its final progress report released today, DRO concluded that the BHU had been transformed from a dark, dangerous, and hopeless place into a more humane setting where prisoners could leave their cells to receive mental health treatment.

DRO found that as of January 2020, ODOC had achieved these key goals:

- BHU residents spent an average of more than 20 hours per week out of their cells,
- Most BHU residents no longer stayed in the BHU for years at time,
 - Approximately five to eight residents per quarter were transferred to less restrictive units;
 - Of the “long-term” residents (i.e., men who have been in BHU for more than 18 months) approximately four per year were transferred to a less restrictive housing unit;
 - Incidents of extreme self-harm and traumatic cell extractions that were once common in the BHU were rare; and

- BHU residents received more effective mental health treatment in a new building that allows them to do so with a level of dignity and confidentiality that was impossible when the agreement was signed in 2016.

“I especially want to thank Director Peters for her willingness to collaborate with DRO’s attorneys and lead her agency to meaningful improvement,” said Jake Cornett, executive director of DRO. “Seeing the humanity of individuals with mental illness is a foundation for driving our state forward and building a stronger future for everyone.”

DRO is a federally-mandated advocacy organization that has unique access authority to go into places that other organizations can’t and request confidential records.

Today’s report, “[Four Years Later: Oregon Prison Overhauls Treatment of Inmates with Serious Mental Illness](#)” is available on our website.

Additional Resources:

- [Investigative Report: Behind the Eleventh Door](#) (May 2015)
- [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (January 2016)
- [Progress Report: Behind the Eleventh Door One Year Later: DRO’s First Annual Report—Progress to Improve Conditions at the Behavioral Health Unit of the Oregon State Penitentiary](#) (April 2017)
- [Progress Report: Behind the Eleventh Door at the Halfway Point: Progress at a Standstill](#) (April 2018)

About Disability Rights Oregon

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more than 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon’s Protection & Advocacy system.

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