



# News Release



DISABILITY RIGHTS OREGON

*This press release is being jointly issued by Disability Rights Oregon and Oregon Department of Corrections*

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## **The Oregon Department of Corrections agrees to reduce isolation and improve the care of seriously mentally ill adults in custody in the Behavioral Health Unit**

The Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) and Disability Rights Oregon (DRO) have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding between the two organizations, effective January 8, 2016. The Memorandum solidifies DOC's commitment to improving its management of adults in custody with serious mental illness.

The Memorandum follows a DRO investigation into the Behavioral Health Unit (BHU) at the Oregon State Penitentiary, in which DOC cooperated fully. The BHU is an intensive behavioral management and skills training unit for incarcerated adults with serious mental illness who have committed violent acts or disruptive behavior. In May 2015, DRO released the results of its investigation in a report. DRO's report concluded that adults in custody in the BHU were routinely isolated in their cells for 23 hours a day without timely access to mental health care and that mental-health related behaviors were often dealt with through unnecessary force for lack of more proactive responses.

While DOC did not agree with all of the findings and conclusions in DRO's report, particularly with respect to the frequency and appropriateness of the department's use of force, the department welcomed the opportunity to focus on improvements to the treatment of adults in custody assigned to the BHU. Unlike a number of other states that have elected to engage in costly, protracted litigation before agreeing to similar reform of their treatment of prisoners with mental illness, DOC instead conducted a comprehensive review of BHU that included consultation with a nationally-recognized expert.

Following that review, DOC and DRO engaged in discussions about improvements to BHU. The results of those discussions are incorporated into the Memorandum. Among the improvements, DOC has committed to changes that will allow individuals who are assigned to the BHU significantly more out-of-cell time. DOC will also provide enhanced access to mental health services and give greater consideration to individual mental health treatment needs. These improvements will require DOC to make architectural, operational, and staffing changes. The Memorandum, therefore, reflects DOC's

and DRO's understanding that the changes will require a formal request for funding by DOC in the 2016 legislative session.

"I am proud of the long-standing relationship and collaboration between DOC and DRO to develop this Memorandum of Understanding," said DOC Director Colette S. Peters. "This is an important step in improving treatment options for those in DOC custody with serious mental illness and improving their chances for success upon their release. We are already taking steps to implement the Memorandum, and are committed to making continued improvements. We look forward to our continued work with DRO, and to more dialogue and interaction to ensure the wellbeing of all adults in custody in Oregon."

Bob Joondeph, Executive Director at Disability Rights Oregon, welcomed the agreement. "When prisoners get an opportunity to spend time outside their cells engaged in constructive activities, they are more likely to be healthy, more likely to learn how to cope with their illness, and more likely to succeed when released. Correctional systems that have adopted similar reforms have seen dramatic improvements in the lives of incarcerated individuals with mental illness and the staff who work with them every day. Treating prisoners with mental illnesses humanely is not just the right thing to do – it will also reduce correctional costs and re-incarceration in the long run. We commend Director Peters' choice to focus her department's resources on improving conditions in the BHU instead of litigation."

Disability Rights Oregon is Oregon's federally designated Protection and Advocacy System. In that capacity, DRO works to uphold the legal rights of people with disabilities.

DOC employs 4,500 staff members at 14 institutions, two community corrections offices, and several centralized support facilities throughout the state. The agency is responsible for the care and custody of over 14,600 adults sentenced to more than 12 months of incarceration, and direct or indirect supervision of 32,000 offenders on felony supervision in the community. DOC is recognized nationally among correctional agencies for providing adults in custody with the cognitive, education, and job skills needed to become productive citizens when they transition back to their communities.

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