



DISABILITY RIGHTS OREGON

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
May 10, 2018

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Report: Multnomah County jail makes initial progress toward improving conditions for inmates with mental illness

Much work remains to address most persistent challenges

Portland, Oregon—Today, Oregon’s leading statewide disability rights organization revealed that the Multnomah County Detention Center (MCDC) has improved conditions for inmates who experience mental health conditions, including expanding access to healthcare in the jail, curbing violence by correctional staff, and limiting solitary confinement. The advocacy group cautions that this initial progress is impeded by stubborn barriers to achieving needed change.

Today’s report measures the progress that the jail has made—in a little more than a year—in implementing some of the recommendations outlined in a 2017 investigative report by Disability Rights Oregon. The report, which caught the attention of policymakers and opinion leaders, found that many individuals with mental illness held at MCDC experienced significant physical and mental harm from the use of force, delayed medical treatment, and routinely being held in solitary confinement.

“We’re encouraged that the jail took many of our recommendations to heart and has taken the first steps forward. But, it’s important that we all keep a watchful eye that these improvements are sustained over time. And we must recognize that we have yet to tackle the hardest piece of work: decriminalizing mental health crises,” said Sarah Radcliffe, reporter author and managing attorney for Disability Rights Oregon’s Mental Health Rights Project. *“Sadly, the jail remains a de facto ‘dumping ground’ for people with mental health conditions. For these men and women the seeming never-ending cycle of ‘charge and release’ to the streets persists. Transforming the*

whole system—from admission to discharge—so that it’s geared toward successful re-entry is what our city needs.”

The improvements that the jail has made in the past year include: increased out-of-cell time and improved tracking of out-of-cell time; improved access to clinical care; cosmetic changes to the psychiatric infirmary; better trained corrections staff who can cope with inmates experiencing mental health conditions, and reductions in the use of restraints, force, and discipline. The jail plans additional improvements to prevent violence and establish greater accountability for the use of force by correctional staff.

Yet, much work remains. In its latest report on the jail’s progress, Disability Rights Oregon emphasized the need to:

- Implement better suicide precautions
- create adequate space for therapeutic treatment, including “in-reach” by community providers
- Address the scarcity of community-based mental health services and permanent supportive housing that fuel the influx of people with mental health conditions into the jail

Every year, roughly 35,000 men and women come through the doors of the Multnomah County jail’s central booking facility. Between 40 to 80 percent of inmates who temporarily live in the county’s jails experience mental illness. The mass incarceration of people who experience mental illness in Portland mirrors a national trend. The three largest institutions of any kind providing psychiatric care in the U.S. are jails in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Additional Resources:

- [“A Merry Go Round that Never Stops: Mental Illness in the Multnomah County Detention Center”](#) (March 2017)
- [Letter from Disability Rights Oregon to Multnomah County Commissioners](#) (March 2017)
- [Response from Commissioner Sharon Meieran](#) (March 2017)

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 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon’s Protection & Advocacy system.

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