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Oregon inmates' mental health problems outstrip a system never designed to handle them

Published: Sunday, June 19, 2011, 9:40 PM Updated: Monday, June 20, 2011, 12:46 PM



By Les Zaitz, The Oregonian

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Brian Feulner/The Oregonian

Inmate Daniel M. Wagner, 32, lives in a special dormitory at Deer Ridge Correctional Institution in Madras, where inmates get mental health care. Corrections Department officials in recent years have

Year after year, the percentage of prisoners battling psychiatric demons has edged up. Now, seven in 10 of the state's 14,000 inmates need some type of mental health care in a system never designed to provide it.

Corrections Department officials have added 525 beds for mental health care since 2005 for a total of 900 -- more than in the Oregon State Hospital. They've created separate mental health infirmaries within prisons. They've even turned a "supermax" facility into a ward for the most severely ill.

It's not enough.

Every day, officials must choose who

turned to such special units to protect inmates and provide more focused care

gets a bed and more focused treatment. The choices carry stark circumstances. Sending troubled inmates back into the general prison

population leaves them vulnerable to taunts and attacks. And some mentally ill inmates lose control, harming themselves, other inmates or employees.

"The corrections environment is not good for a person with serious mental health illness," said Jana Russell, administrator of the Corrections Department's Behavioral Health Services Division.

But with Oregon's prison population growing and the state required to provide inmates with free health care, no easy answers are in sight.

More
Inmates with mental problems are overrunning Oregon's prison resources.

Judges turn to prisons

In Oregon and across the country, the mix of inmates with mental illness poses an increasing challenge.

Inmates are five times as likely as the general population to suffer from mental health problems, the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics found in a 2006 study. Of those with mental issues, nine out of 10 abused drugs or alcohol. Mental illness is most pronounced among prisoners younger than 24, and women have far higher rates of mental illness than men, the report said.

"We can't cure most people," said Dr. Don Kern, president of the **Society of Correctional Physicians**. "We're managing a chronic problem. Is it an ideal setting? No."

The loss of mental health services in communities has turned the prison system into one of the state's largest mental health providers. Corrections authorities say judges sometimes send an offender to state prison, convinced that's the only place they'll find treatment.

There's good reason for that belief: By law, the state prison system must provide free full medical care to every inmate. Oregon is expected to spend more than \$100 million on health care in the next year, with about \$16 million going to mental health.

Mental health needs of Oregon inmates
3,988: No reported need
2,971: No need for treatment
2,503: Would benefit from treatment
1,242: Moderate need for treatment
2,400: Severe mental problems
951: Highest need for treatment
Source: Oregon Department of Corrections, May 2011

But health professionals say more than a mandate should drive care for mentally ill inmates. Nine out of 10 Oregon inmates will one day be released, they say, and turning them free with unresolved issues -- and little community care -- leaves them at higher risk for committing new crimes for lack of something as simple as daily medication.

And landing people back to prison only adds to the state's costs.

With decent treatment, "we have a better chance of them living a better life and avoiding criminal conduct," said Bob Joondeph, executive director of **Disability Rights Oregon**.

Greater suicide risk

Corrections officials are scrambling to find solutions. For starters, they are backing away from placing troubled inmates in solitary confinement, recognizing that isolation often worsens psychiatric issues and increases suicide attempts.

In 2004, a task force recommended setting up separate treatment units or even a new prison to serve as a mental hospital.

"The potential for preventing suicide attempts, preventing weaker inmates from being victimized and teaching skills to function within a highly charged environment is imperative," the task force said.

With the Legislature's approval, corrections officials worked for three years to design just such a building, planning to put it next to a state hospital set to be built in Junction City. The new prison would offer four levels of care, bringing under one roof the most troubled of Oregon's inmates.

But with the state budget crisis looming, officials pulled the plug last year.

"We were devastated," said Russell, the behavioral health administrator. "We were hanging on by the skin of our teeth."

Now the new prison may not be available for nearly a decade. Until then, too many inmates won't get the treatment they need, Joondeph said.

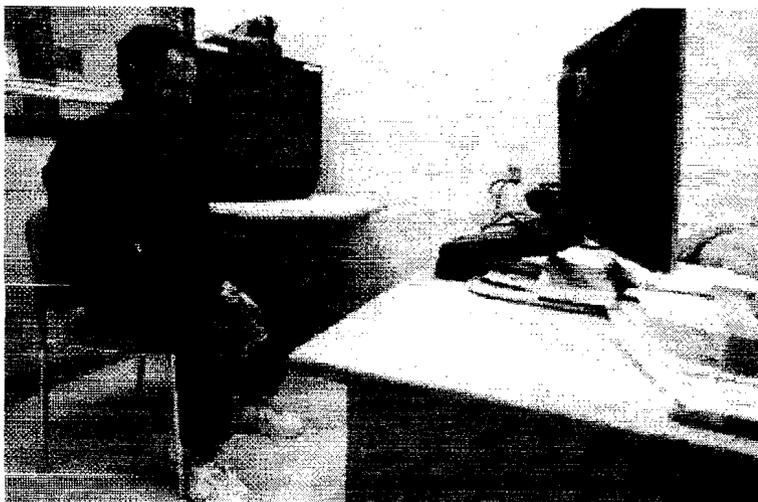
"They are not going to be ready to return to society when their time is up," he said. "There is a greater risk of suicide among these inmates. There is a greater risk to people who are vulnerable as a result of their mental illness."

"It's what we have"

Prison authorities in recent years have also established mental health infirmaries at the state's largest prisons, including Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem and Snake River Correctional Institution outside Ontario.

But that effort has faltered, too. No psychiatrists will work for a prison in eastern Oregon, so health professionals have resorted to teleconferencing with inmates.

To get around that, corrections officials elected to bring the most severely ill inmates to the Willamette Valley. But where to put them? In what Russell called the "craziest brainstorm," eyes turned to the 145-year-old penitentiary in Salem.



Brian Feulner/The Oregonian

Inmate Ken R. White, 44, speaks with a mental health nurse practitioner at Deer Ridge Correctional Institution. The Corrections Department has expanded its mental health care in recent years but is

Deep inside is Oregon's version of a "supermax" -- a high-security setting for the most dangerous offenders. Mental health experts decided the area, if modified, would be a safe place for mentally ill inmates. Last fall, the mental health unit opened with 187 beds, replacing the supermax unit.

No one finds it ideal. One prison official said it reminded him of scenes from "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," a movie filmed in the dreary reaches of Oregon State Hospital.

"This is not a great environment for doing this, but it's what we have," said Joondeph, who recently toured the unit.

still short on staff for mental health emergencies at nights and on weekends.

Other prisons have managed to carve out space for mental treatment programs. Minimum-security Deer Ridge Correctional Institution in

Madras, for example, uses pods that look like large dormitories. They have specially trained corrections officers and regular visits by counselors and therapists, though the inmates lack privacy, prison officials said.

But in the long run, big changes will have to wait.

In the last three budget cycles, the Corrections Department has sought money for around-the-clock mental health staffing. Now, staff has to be called in for crises on nights or weekends.

But Gov. John Kitzhaber didn't recommend the additional funding this session. Corrections officials said in an internal report that they would manage the best they could, "understanding the inherent risks continue."

-- Les Zaitz

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lynne97030 June 19, 2011 at 9:06PM

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Dunno where you get drinking, smoking and fornicating but I agree with you -- much mental illness evolves out of individuals genetically predisposed to not being able to cope with the society into which they're born.

But I disagree with euthanizing all those with genetic predispositions to chemical brain imbalances or brutal, overwhelming childhoods -- I think it's up to the civilized to work on changing society to do a better job making the world a more productive place for its members.

My own stability is much improved, thank you, with the taxpayers' (I myself was one for over 35 years) assistance. Your question about running out of money is valid -- remember the old saying, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?" Ben Franklin said that in the early years of our country. Too bad we didn't remember it BEFORE we shut down our mental hospitals, demonized contraception and underfunded our school system.

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lynne97030 June 20, 2011 at 2:14PM

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O-Live yanked the comment to which this comment was a reply...so this doesn't make much sense. Sorry 'bout that.

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aswengin June 20, 2011 at 9:20PM

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I think most of us can read between the lines Lynn, and your comment makes a lot of sense.

The one thing I might add is that if we can pay for elected officials to have life long health insurance and retirement after a single term in office, I guess we can take care of our inmates whom in most cases have much better ethics and do less harm to society than the criminals we elect to office.

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lynne97030 June 19, 2011 at 4:26PM

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Thank you for this report on what has become a national disgrace.

How pathetic that the criminal justice system should have to take on this issue in the wake of our government's failure to provide medical care for American citizens!

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dundeessage June 19, 2011 at 6:34PM

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The "disgrace" about this is why 7 of 10 in this population sampling have mental problems. Is that implying something?

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lynne97030 June 19, 2011 at 8:48PM

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To me it implies that not only is there a stigma on seeking treatment for mental health but that too many people have no access to decent health care when it might do them some good, in adolescence. I also believe there are too many fragmented low-income families not prepared for the stresses of parenting. Even if we don't put people in jail directly for substance abuse (which is a sign of mental illness), we don't treat them either, and many of them act out criminally in order to maintain their drug supply.

In general I think we ignore people with mental illness until they've committed some crime for which we can lock them up, and then we do so.

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jory June 20, 2011 at 7:49AM

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9 out of 10 supposed "mental health problems" are alcohol and drug abuse. By sitting prison denied of access to alcohol and drugs, the problem is solved. Thank you Oregon Prisons.

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thetruth June 21, 2011 at 2:08AM

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"9 out of 10 supposed "mental health problems" are alcohol and drug abuse."

Really? So where exactly did you get these numbers? In your head?

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jory June 20, 2011 at 7:53AM

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\$100 million for 14,000 people is \$7,143 per year per person. That's roughly \$600/mo for medical, dental and mental health. That's actually less than the average for the population as a whole.

Come on Oregonian. Quit sensationalizing something that isn't sensational.

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The Mascara Snake June 20, 2011 at 10:12AM

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Yet another problem socialized health care could cure. The tax dollars spent on inmates is pathetic and almost totally avoidable (see every country with socialized health care and how low their prison populations are compared to the US.)

So, USA - want to keep spouting that super moronic anti-socialism rhetoric? Good luck with that, jerks.

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Robert June 19, 2011 at 4:30PM

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What law mandates free health care for prison inmates - and how do we change it? This sounds like something a Democrat would do.

We on the outside have to fund our own health care - I don't see why criminals get a better deal than we do.

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greeneyedpea June 19, 2011 at 4:37PM

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Robert, What you don't understand is that these many of these incarcerated people are mentally ill, and become "criminals" b/c the illness is not properly treated. If it were, they would not be criminals. Our prisons are overrun by mentally ill. Law enforcement is not trained, suited nor able to handle this, nor should they. Leave the prisons for true criminals.

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jory June 20, 2011 at 8:02AM

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You imply that only the mentally ill commit crimes. Not true. Some people simply don't like to follow rules. I admire the rebel.

Perhaps, it's the mindless drone who wakes up everyday heading off to a meaningless job where he toils for a greedy owner only to come home and veg out on TV all night then does the same thing day after day after day. Now that's mental illness.

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apeptic June 19, 2011 at 7:23PM

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Robert, you asked "What law mandates free health care for prison inmates?" That would be the United States Constitution. Specifically, the Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

You also asked "how do we change it?" There is a means for altering the Constitution as described in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article_Five_of_the_United_States_Constitution

Finally, you described the Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution as sounding "like something a Democrat would do," and I think you are right.

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Rarian_Rakista_200

June 20, 2011 at 12:27AM

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The same one that requires us to take care of senior citizens.

I say senior citizens are the far greater burden, consuming over half of our medical care.

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