

POLITICS

How can RI reduce the number of women in prison? Panel says transitional housing is a start.



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Key Points

- Incarcerated women have high rates of PTSD and substance-use disorders, and often have been victims of abuse
 - The Department of Corrections previously proposed closing the Gloria McDonald women's facility to save money.
 - Members of a special legislative commission want to see more support services for women who are spending only a short time in jail.
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A panel tasked with finding ways to reduce incarceration among women in Rhode Island sees a need for significantly more support services and transitional housing.

"I'm hearing a theme," Sen. Meghan Kallman said during a meeting last Thursday of the special legislative commission she chairs.

The commission was created in 2021 after the Department of Corrections proposed closing the Gloria McDonald Women's Facility in order to cut costs. In addition to lawmakers and advocates, members include representatives from the DOC, the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals and the state Parole Board.

After hearing presentations from former DOC Director Patricia Coyne-Fague and outside experts, the group convened last week to discuss its main takeaways — which turned out to be remarkably consistent.

A common theme: PTSD, abuse, mental-health challenges

Many commission members said they were struck by how often incarcerated women had histories of abuse, trauma and addiction. Kallman mentioned two statistics that stood out to her: 60% of the women "met the cutoff for PTSD," while 80% met the criteria for having a substance-use disorder. Additionally, 60% had children.

Mavis Nimoh, executive director for the Center for Health and Justice Transformation, echoed those observations.

Women who are incarcerated often have behavioral-health challenges, and often are not there for violent offenses, she pointed out. And they are often the head of their households, meaning that their families are broken up while they're behind bars.

"I think it's critically important to think about the disruption of the family unit," she said, suggesting that the state would "do well to move away from incarceration to a community-based setting" where women can get the support that they need.

In particular, Nimoh said, "we've seen transitional housing be incredibly successful, especially for women." In some cases, she said, it's allowed women to be reunited with their children. ("Transitional housing" typically refers to temporary housing that comes with access to social services. It can be an alternative to incarceration, or a place to go after being incarcerated.)

Nick Horton, co-executive director of OpenDoors, said that he'd been struck by the fact that the majority of incarcerated women have been victims of sexual assault at some point.

"It made me think about the women's prison less as a building that we use to control crime, and more as a building that we use to house victims," he said.

Kathleen Kelly, executive counsel to the Rhode Island Judiciary, shared an anecdote about a friend who is a forensic scientist and used to take DNA samples at the ACI.

"When she went to the male facilities, they'd be very angry and say, 'I'm not giving you my DNA, I don't have to give you my DNA,'" Kelly said. "She would go to the women's facilities and the women would say, 'This is great. When they find my body, they'll be able to identify who I am.'"

Downsides to short sentences

Another finding that the group highlighted: Women tend to receive relatively short sentences, which means that they're not in prison long enough to receive services that they might benefit from – for instance, the option to enroll in a college class.

Those short sentences can be "extraordinarily disruptive," Pisaturo noted.

Donna Collins, the warden for Gloria McDonald, noted that the facility houses two populations: Women who have been sentenced to prison, and women who may be jailed for as little as one day while awaiting arraignment or trial.

"As a state, it would behoove us to do a better job with helping out the women who are very transient," Collins said. "To break the cycle of shelters to prisons to shelters to prison would be advantageous."

Collins said that more transitional housing would "absolutely" be beneficial, as would more support services.

Group calls for more supportive housing

"Housing is critical. And education and training," Pisaturo said. "People need to have the skills to help break their cycles of reincarceration."

Dina Bruce, program director for OpenDoors, said that women who are caught up in the justice system often never had the opportunity to learn basic life skills.

"Some women have never been taught, even as a child, things as simple as hygiene," said Bruce, who was formerly incarcerated. "Some people don't even know where to start, because they haven't been taught anything from the beginning."

She added: "Most likely, if you've been on drugs and you're running the streets and things like that, you don't have your ID, you don't have your birth certificate, 'cause you don't keep up with things like that. You may never have had a job."

Last year, OpenDoors began offering transitional housing to women leaving prison. The 14-bed sober-living program incorporates therapy, coaching and case management. Horton said the organization sees it as a way to demonstrate that "diversion and alternatives to incarceration are very much possible" and would like to scale up.

"There is a lot of funding out there for social services, but it's not all coordinated, and it's particularly not all coordinated around this goal," he said, later adding, "We're not necessarily saying that to make this project work we need to go to the legislature and ask for \$100 million. We're saying, let's go to the legislature and find the \$100 million that already exists out there that we could use to focus on this challenge."

What's next?

The panel is due to produce a mid-commission report. Kallman said last week that she intends to work with staff to come up with a draft that can be discussed at the next meeting.

She added that it was clear that, "without exception," group members want to see more transitional housing and support services. The next step will be to "dig into the weeds about what that means," she said.

This story has been corrected to reflect the fact that the anecdote about forensic testing in prison was recounted by Kathleen Kelly, executive counsel to the RI Judiciary.