



Albany Democrat-Herald: Oak Creek plans remodel



Mike Riggan, superintendent of Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility, talks about plans for a separate school building and other renovations. The idea is to push back the wall behind him and use the space for a two-story school and multipurpose room.

By Jennifer Moody, Albany Democrat-Herald
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Officials at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany can't control the factors that led their young charges to incarceration.

However, they want to create the best possible environmental conditions to ensure they never return.

To that end, **Oregon Youth Authority** spokesman C.J. Drake said the agency is recommending the state pay for a two-phase effort to upgrade and otherwise renovate some of its juvenile facilities, including Oak Creek.

If the Legislature agrees, OYA wants to spend \$2,098,000 to reconfigure the facility's unit control area, fix leaky windows and take care of deferred maintenance, all starting sometime in July. Phase Two, sometime after the start of the 2017-19 biennium, would be new construction: a two-story building that would house a school above and a multipurpose area below, with expansion of the facility's clinic, for an estimated price tag of \$3,070,000.

The idea, Drake said, is to start "aligning the physical environment with best practices in juvenile justice."

"The upgrades will foster an environment that is much more suited to reformation, reflecting best practices in juvenile justice and the latest thinking about adolescent behavior," he said. "That can only contribute to less victimization and recidivism."

Funding depends on three bills still alive in the current session. House Bills 5005 and 5006, which deal with bond funding, and Senate Bill 5542, which appropriates money from the general fund for various OYA expenses.

Drake said he's also encouraged by a warm reception from lawmakers in late February when OYA presented the strategic plan to the Ways and Means Public Safety Subcommittee. "We're trying to build support for the program in the public and the Legislature," he said.

Shifts over time

Both juvenile criminal offense trends and the understanding of how to cope with them have undergone significant changes since Oak Creek first opened in December 1997 at 4400 Lochner Road S.E.

The building, too, has changed, as has its population.

In the mid-1990s, Oregon was in the middle of a young offender crackdown. Juvenile arrests had been on the rise nationwide since 1980, according to FBI statistics, particularly for violent crimes. The arrest rate for female offenders was increasing twice as fast as the rate for males. Drug abuse arrest rates had jumped more than 70 percent in four years.

In Oregon, Gov. Barbara Roberts created a task force on juvenile crime in 1993 to work on expanding correctional systems to cope with the growing influx. That led to formation of the Oregon Youth Authority in 1995 — an independent department to oversee the youth justice system — and construction of five new youth jails, including Oak Creek.

When first completed, the 44,000-square-foot correctional center had separate units: a state-run side for up to 72 girl and boy offenders, and a separate, county-run unit for up to 20 youths called the Linn-Benton Detention Center.

By 2000, with arrest rates plunging nationwide, the state consolidated its female offenders at Hillcrest in Salem, leaving Oak Creek's state unit a boys-only facility. Three years later, state budget cutbacks closed the state side of Oak Creek entirely, along with three of its other regional facilities.

Acting on Gov. Ted Kulongoski's budget recommendation in 2006, lawmakers approved a plan to reopen Oak Creek as an all-female facility. Remodeling began in late 2007 and girls were transferred back there the following year. It now has 75 beds for young offenders ages 12 to 24.

The remodel focused efforts on gender-specific treatment programs, according to Oak Creek's online archives. But even in the past seven years, the understanding of how to approach young female offenders has grown exponentially, said Mike Riggan, Oak Creek superintendent.

In the late 1970s, for instance, juvenile sex offender treatment programs were almost unknown. Emphasis in recent decades has shifted from rehabilitation to punishment and back to rehabilitation.

More is known now about the development of young brains and how long it takes to completely develop the centers that control impulsive actions and fully grasp their consequences.

"The field constantly kind of evolves," Riggan said.

Changing designs

Even with its 2008 remodel, Oak Creek, Riggan said, is built "very much through a correction lens."

That's important for safety, he acknowledged, but it's equally important to remember the people it houses are still children.

"You have to create the environments that are going to help kids, vulnerable kids, improve and get better," he said.

The two-phase project is meant to carve out some dedicated space within Oak Creek for education, visiting and medical work, all of which currently operate in either too-small spaces or rooms with multiple purposes.

Take the current clinic, Riggan said. It operates out of one cramped exam room and one closet-sized records room. The scale stands in the hallway and the eye charts are posted on the hallway doors.

Yet OYA has found female offenders are much more likely than males to have high-risk medical issues, both physical and mental, and the needs themselves tend to be more acute. It makes sense, he said, to at least have a second exam room, which is slated to be added during the second remodel phase.

Educational space is also a need, Riggan said.

Right now, the correctional facility's computer lab is squeezed into one corner of a triangular room that also houses a small library and a meeting space. Teachers push carts of supplies from dorm unit to dorm unit to lead different classes. Every transition is another opportunity for someone to lift a bit of contraband.

Having a dedicated school space atop a large multipurpose room would both free up space for groups and activities and keep education materials in one secure area, Riggan said.

It also helps mimic the outside world's practice of having older students move from room to room to attend classes, something it will help to have practiced once they return to that world.

Oak Creek's various gathering spaces are used by different people for different purposes three to four times each day, Riggan said.

"Right now, everything's a multipurpose room. Even the dorms are multipurpose rooms (for groups and activities," Riggan said. "You're just always trying to find space, and you're trying to give them uninterrupted time."

Science is finding stable circumstances, and some form of solitude, are critical for young offenders, especially women, he added. Constantly being crowded and on the move is "just not ideal," especially for youths who have trouble focusing as it is.

"We're reducing the number of variables kids have to contend with," he said.

If the state agrees to fund the efforts, the first phase, which includes repairs and changes to the unit control areas, should be done by the end of June 2017, Drake estimated.

No designs are in place for the unit controls, but Riggan said he envisions them being a little bit less "cagelike," promoting more interaction while still providing for supervision and staff access.

Philosophical shift

Changes are occurring within the agency's philosophies, too. From now through August, all of OYA's 1,100 employees are going through a training series called Positive Human Development.

The workshops concentrate on the key factors of healthy brain, creating low stress environments and the importance of creating opportunities for connecting both with the community and with caring, supportive relationships.

The training is part of the agency's Youth Reformation System, which uses research and "predictive analytics" to help determine the most effective placements and treatments for youth in OYA's custody.

According to the training documents, the idea is to continue holding youths accountable, but to move away from punishment and focus instead on developing life skills. It's based on a five-level pyramid that has safety and security as its base, then moves through relationships, high expectations and meaningful participation, all capped with community connections.

Oak Creek is working to make those connections through existing programs, Riggan said, such as its Young Women's Transition Program, in which residents who demonstrate good behavior are allowed out into the community for various activities and projects.

The belief, however, is that rearranging the physical facility will enhance the ability to develop those life skills, Drake said. "The structural changes will help us make the cultural changes to sustain that positive trend."

That's critical, Riggan said, because places like Oak Creek aren't meant for permanent housing.

"Eventually," he said, "all these kids are going to return to the community."