GLOBE MAGAZINE

The state wants to replace a crumbling women's prison. But some lawmakers are trying to abolish prisons altogether.

Massachusetts imprisons fewer people than any other state. Reformers say the conditions are perfect for a radical experiment.

By Jesse Singal Updated December 17, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



MCI-Framingham is oldest continuously operating women's prison in the United States. SOPHIE PARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The problem, for years, seemed to be intractable. MCI-Framingham, the country's oldest continuously operating women's prison, was falling apart. There was broad consensus that between the mold, toxic chemicals, and the many other problems with the facility's buildings, conditions were not good for the women incarcerated there.

In late 2019, Massachusetts began taking steps to close the prison, then 142 years old. By 2021, the bureaucratic process of making plans to build a new one had rumbled to life, with an estimated price tag of $50 million. The state instructed firms competing for the contract to submit "trauma informed" designs with "an eye to specific needs of the female prison population," ostensibly enhancing the facility's rehabilitative potential.

The planned replacement of a decaying compound from an earlier era with a sleek, humane new prison — the sort of facility you'd be more likely to find in Sweden or Norway than the United States — could have marked something of a victory lap. It came at the end of a wildly successful decade in which the state drastically reduced its population of imprisoned nonviolent offenders and enacted major reforms to dial back the excesses of the "tough on crime" era.

But there was fierce opposition to the proposal. Not from law-and-order types, or those worried about spending taxpayer money on women convicted of serious crimes, but from another group: progressives.

A subset of the prison reform movement consists of so-called abolitionists who do not believe in incarceration, full stop. And in 2022, a group of abolitionist activists and legislators succeeded in passing a bill that would have put a five-year moratorium on new prison construction, only to see it vetoed by then-Governor Charlie Baker.

"We shouldn't be building any new prisons. Rather, we should redirect our efforts to focus on how we can keep individuals in our community from being incarcerated," state Representative Chynah Tyler, who backed the moratorium, told the Globe in 2022.

Now, a similar bill is making its way through the state Legislature.

With Massachusetts sending a smaller percentage of its residents to prison than any other state, abolitionists have seized on the question of how far decarceration can go here. They see, in the Commonwealth, a chance to push the boundaries of the issue in a way that isn't possible in most American states.

"We think we have an opportunity in Massachusetts because we have a smaller [incarcerated] population, because we've had some reforms here to really pause and say, *We don't need new jail and prison construction,*" Mallory Hanora Kaczmarek, the head of the prison abolitionist organization Families for Justice as Healing, told me this year (she uses her middle name professionally).

But there is an awkward reality for the prison abolitionists. Of the state's tiny female prison population, which hovers around 200, a significant number were convicted of serious crimes, including murder. What happens to them?

For the past few years, the inmates have been left in limbo — neither let out in a sweeping victory for the prison abolition movement, nor transferred to a sparkling new facility — as the compound crumbles around them. Then in June, Governor Maura Healey announced a plan that seems designed to maneuver around the proposed moratorium — one that shocked abolitionists, inmates, and even officials in Framingham.

Mallory Hanora heads up Families for Justice as Healing, a prison abolition group. SOPHIE PARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The facility now known as MCI-Framingham opened in 1877 as the Sherborn Reformatory for Women. It was built with rehabilitation in mind — or at least the 19th-century version of it. Sherborn had a library, school, chapel, and also a sewing room, garden, greenhouse, and a dairy, where women could learn domestic skills.

During one period in the 1970s and 1980s, a few male inmates were brought in as part of an experiment. An armed robber who had recently transferred extolled his new living situation to *The New York Times* in 1974. "If you've got to be in prison, this is the place to be," he said. "I mean, you wake up in the morning and you see trees, and you walk down the walk with a chick. You can't beat it!"

But by 1992, when Kathleen Dennehy began a two-year tenure as superintendent of the prison, she remembers, "I was stunned at the neglect of the physical plant" compared with the condition of the men's facilities where she'd previously worked.

MCI-Framingham is a hodgepodge of buildings constructed, renovated, and replaced at different times, and by the 2010s, its problems were rapidly outpacing the Commonwealth's ability to repair them. Four of its residential "cottages" were closed in 2016 because they were found to contain toxic chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs. In a 2017 lawsuit, an inmate named Lee Unitt claimed her cell reached 101 degrees during a 2016 heat wave, causing her to have multiple strokes. (As the *Globe* reported, that lawsuit, alongside another filed by Unitt, were dismissed by a federal judge who found that "though there may have been high heat and toxins in her cell, Unitt had not provided sufficient expert evidence to back up her claims.")

In 2019, state inspectors were unable even to assess parts of the facility because of ongoing asbestos abatement. Inspections in 2019 and 2021 found decomposing rodents and mold, among other problems.

Even in the newest building, constructed in 1991, inmates and advocates have raised concerns about the water. A former resident, still in custody but now in a different unit, described the water there as "cloudy" in an email to me and wrote that it "looked

carbonated almost … It behaved really strange for 'safe' water, it fizzled." One inmate later told me she believed the water quality had improved. But inmates say corrections officers in this unit are provided with free bottled water. ("The water in all DOC facilities is tested regularly and is within acceptable standards," said Scott Croteau, director of media relations.)

Even prison staff "tell you not to drink the water there," said state Representative Erika Uyterhoeven, a prison abolitionist from Somerville who has frequently visited MCI-Framingham. They say, "'You're gonna get sick.'"

As MCI-Framingham's physical condition grew more dire in the 2010s, advocates for reforming the justice system were making major strides elsewhere. "Mass incarceration" had become a household term, and a trend toward softening the justice system's roughest edges had taken hold. That the prison system was bloated, expensive, and frequently unfair was an area of rare (somewhat) bipartisan agreement.

In Massachusetts, the "opening move" in the era of decarceration "came in 2010, when Governor Deval Patrick signed compromise legislation reducing some sentence length rules for the first time in 30 years," according to a report published by the nonprofit Boston Foundation. From there, a broad coalition of activists, lawmakers, and prisoners themselves grew more ambitious.

One of this coalition's most important victories came in the form of the Criminal Justice Reform Act, signed into law by Baker in 2018. The sweeping bill significantly reduced the use of solitary confinement, ended some mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenses, and expanded "compassionate release" for inmates who were ill, elderly, or both. The changes came during a period when the MCI-Framingham population (like the overall prison population in the state) was plummeting: there were 586 women incarcerated in Framingham in 2010; a decade later, that number had dropped to 226.

By any measure, Massachusetts has achieved widespread decarceration, with much of the remaining prison population consisting of violent offenders. According to Croteau, of the 163 sentenced inmates at MCI-Framingham, "Seventy-seven (47 percent) are serving a loss of life sentence," meaning they had committed a crime that led to someone's death. (Some inmates are awaiting trial or sentencing.)

In late 2019, Massachusetts began taking steps to accommodate this smaller population, planning to close the aging facility by 2024.

This might have been met with cheers: a smaller, more humane prison for a reduced group of offenders, many of whom the state did not think could be safely released into the community. Instead, the abolitionists went to battle.

State Senator William N. Brownsberger (at right, shown in 2021) coauthored the 2018 criminal justice reform bill. ERIN CLARK / GLOBE STAFF

State Senator William N. Brownsberger, who represents the Suffolk and Middlesex District, coauthored the 2018 criminal justice reform bill that Baker signed, and is considered one of the state's leading lawmakers on this subject.

Brownsberger speaks like a politician, in the sense that he seems to strip his words of anything resembling unnecessary drama before they escape his lips. But when Massachusetts' prison abolitionists come up during a Zoom conversation, he slows and seems to pick his words carefully. "Look, I mean, the idea of prison abolition is an aspirational idea," he tells me. "It's a … it's a statement of a hope, of a direction. And as a

direction, it's great. But you know, there's some directions you can only move so far in in practice."

Hanora's group, Families for Justice as Healing, is pushing to find a way.

"We need new approaches that can bring us to a different place that can make us be the first state without a state prison for women, because we don't need one," she says.

The organization's mission is, in part, to "shift resources away from the criminal punishment system and into Black and Brown communities," which they do through a number of campaigns and stipends for women who had been incarcerated, such as a "healing" fund that allows them "to engage in self-care activities." They also lobby on behalf of incarcerated women, calling for access to better jobs training and health care.

Hanora and her group began trying to delay the prison project, showing up at meetings of the Designer Selection Board, the body responsible for choosing the firms that will complete public buildings, and asking the board to cancel it (which the board doesn't have power to do). They lobbied architecture firms to withdraw their bids — in at least one instance, successfully.

Twice, Families for Justice as Healing complained to the attorney general's office that proper protocol was not followed with regard to the legally required public advertisements about the new prison. In one instance the AG's office agreed and forced the design board to pull the ad, delaying the project.

But bureaucratic delays can only do so much. If building a new prison is *outlawed,* at least for a time, that's another story. So by 2020, the group began lobbying for a moratorium on the construction of new prisons. In the 2021-2022 legislative session, state Senator Joanne Comerford introduced a bill that would have instituted a five-year pause on any prison construction or expansion, with an exception for necessary renovations (the House version was introduced by Representative Tyler). "FJAH was/is very much in the lead regarding the legislation," Comerford said in an email.

"They approached me to file the bill and my team worked on the language with them." The moratorium language was tucked into a bond bill that passed the Legislature in 2022, only for Baker to veto that section.

For a while, the moratorium bill was hanging, Damoclean, over the stalled new-prison project. And despite the Baker-veto setback, there had been some hope among the abolitionists that the new bill would be passed and signed this prior legislative session.

Governor Maura Healey's plan for MCI-Framingham seems to get around a proposed moratorium on new prisons. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

In April, Governor Maura Healey declined an interview request but, through a spokesperson, exhibited openness — albeit cautiously — to signing the bill. "Governor Healey supports efforts to stop new construction of prison infrastructure, provided it does not preclude the state from making critical renovations to maintain safe, modern facilities and attain quality programming and services."

In March, well before Healey reversed course, Brownsberger described all this talk of a moratorium as a "distraction." "There was a movement to build a new facility, but that movement really got torpedoed by those who felt that there should be no women's facility, and I think the unfortunate result is that there's a substandard women's facility."

Prison-reform advocates are quick to point out that many of the problems with Massachusetts prisons have nothing to do with their physical condition.

In 2022, two former prisoners filed a lawsuit against former MCI-Framingham guard Melvis Romero, as well as several of his colleagues, the prison's health provider, and the Department of Correction itself, alleging that "Romero would routinely isolate them, and lead them to an empty utility closet, where he would abuse them," as WGBH reported. (According to the most recent filing, the case is effectively paused as a result of the health provider filing for bankruptcy. All the named defendants have denied the accusations, except Romero, who hasn't responded to them.) Last year, another guard, Joao Gomes, was indicted on charges that he raped one inmate and groomed others via a disturbing pattern in which he would buy them gifts such as pizza and candy, as well as thongs. (His trial is scheduled for March.)

When I met with Uyterhoeven at a Central Square coffee shop in March, she came equipped with a laptop loaded with documentation detailing what she described as countless problems with the Department of Correction. She quickly rattled off a list of complaints: she'd been kept from visiting prisons and jails despite a law granting legislators access; the department had chronically failed to turn over documents she had requested about disciplinary practices. She added that inmates at MCI-Framingham were subjected to unnecessary strip searches, including prior to virtual meetings with her or their lawyers. "I don't understand how, like, contraband moves through my Zoom screen," she said. ("Searches are required upon leaving the congregate area to maintain security, prevent contraband, and uphold the integrity of the correctional environment," Croteau says.)

State Representative Erika Uyterhoeven, shown in 2022, is a prison abolitionist from Somerville. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

In emails, inmates described to me nightmarish practices involving routine medical care, which is delivered in a separate building, the entrance to which requires intrusive

security measures. One wrote that “many of us do not have mammograms due to the whole process. You leave by 7 am, sit in a cold holding cell, cuffed and shackled, for hours … Personally, I haven’t been in about 8 years, and there are some who haven’t had one in 15+ years.” (Croteau did not directly address this allegation in his response to the *Globe*’s questions.)

Uyterhoeven’s list of concerns would likely have had Brownsberger nodding along. But lurking in the background during our conversation was the question of whether we can really do away with prisons entirely.

I asked her: Whatever else one thinks about the cruelties of the criminal justice system, shouldn’t someone who just killed someone by, say, pushing them in front of a train, as has happened recently where I live, in New York, be forced to spend a little time in confinement, if only to protect others? Uyterhoeven laughed uncomfortably. “I’m laughing because it’s a very pointed way of, you know …” She paused for a long time, then continued, haltingly. “I mean, it’s really hard to say, because we don’t have a system that provides them that support. But you know what I mean, like, we’re trying to imagine a world where people were given the supports and the chances to, yeah, you know, which, unfortunately …” She didn’t finish the sentence.

A major symbolic victory for moratorium advocates came not long after Baker left office. In a dramatic June 2023 legislative hearing, more than 20 incarcerated women at MCI-Framingham testified, via Zoom, in support of the bill. The women’s testimony varied, but broadly focused on the violence, addiction, and other trauma they had encountered inside and outside the justice system. They argued politely but assertively against spending tens of millions of dollars on a new prison rather than addressing the root causes of incarceration.

Watching their testimony brought me back to an interview with Hanora, when I asked her the first question most prison abolitionists get*: What should society do about people who commit serious violent crimes and may be a danger to the public?* She responded, "I think when we pause and think about what the worst cases are, many of them are sensationalized — and these are very rare, right? I think some of my comrades who have been convicted, and some loved ones of mine who have been convicted of first- or second-degree murder, for example, are loving grandparents, are home now, and like, alone with my kids."

(Hanora later emailed to clarify: "I did not mean to suggest that there are not cases [of] egregious harm; of course there are. I meant that the media — both news and entertainment media — tends to focus on those acts of egregious harm …")

But while the media can sensationalize crime, it is also true that many of the women who testified had committed acts of extreme violence. One woman had been homeless, and during that time brutally tortured another homeless woman to death. Another had set an apartment building on fire, killing a mother of four. Another had stabbed an ex-boyfriend's girlfriend to death; while another had murdered a woman and that woman's 2-year-old son. Most of the women who testified had killed someone, one way or another.

It should go without saying that the severity of some women's offenses doesn't render the problems at MCI-Framingham, and elsewhere in the prison system, any less serious. No developed country with a beating moral heart would say that those convicted of violent crimes deserve miserable conditions. But the nature of the women's offenses does cast into stark relief what Hanora, Uyterhoeven, and their allies on the left flank of the reform movement were asking of Bay State politicians and residents: to accept that no one should be incarcerated.

Families for Justice as Healing holds that much of the opposition to building a new facility comes from prisoners themselves; hence the testimony. But this spring, when I reached out to as many of the women who testified as I could get in touch with via

CorrLinks, an email system for inmates, I found that many of them were operating under misconceptions about what that facility would be.

An aerial view of MCI-Framingham taken in 2020. BLAKE NISSEN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

MCI-Framingham is, despite its many problems, set in a quiet, bucolic part of Framingham. That was the first thing I noticed when I got out of my car for a brief and tightly controlled visit in March: the quiet. Many of the women there enjoy considerable access to outdoor spaces, including a community-run garden.

The available evidence suggests that the Commonwealth always sought to re-create this sort of setup with the new prison: "The Project must utilize the principles of trauma-informed design to create welcoming and therapeutic spaces," explains a 2021 Designer Selection Board document providing instructions to the firms competing for the bid.

The new prison, in other words, was never likely to be some sort of supermax fortress. But as the debate intensified, rumors to the contrary metastasized within MCI-Framingham. Patricia Olsen, one of the women who testified, told me that all the inmates she has spoken with about this issue say "they don't want to be in a facility where the windows don't open and we don't have a large yard like we have now." When I asked where she'd heard they would lose their outdoor space, she replied, "This is all the types of prisons that this particular contractor builds, so we're just assuming this is what they want to build." Another inmate, Robin Casali, told me in June that "if they were to build a new prison, it would be modeled like a maximum security prison."

When I emailed Hanora, whose group helped coordinate the prisoners' testimony, to ask about these rumors, she pointed to state officials. "We don't have reason to think a new

design would be a maximum," she said, "but women's fears are valid because they haven't been included in the process and because of recent history." Shawn Jenkins, Department of Correction commissioner, contested Hanora's account. "We have gone to MCI-Framingham and we have engaged in a series of town halls," he said. "I have been there four or five times recently to engage with the population there, talk about this project, make myself, as well as the command staff, available for any questions related to the project."

On June 30, Governor Healey made an announcement that would upend the debate and deal a devastating blow to Hanora's group and its allies: "Today, the Healey-Driscoll Administration announced a capital investment plan to transform MCI-Framingham, originally built in 1877, into a modern and sustainable facility that supports rehabilitation and promotes public safety," Healey's office said in a press release. The cost? Not $50 million, but $360 million.

The moratorium bill is still in the legislative pipeline, but as written it allows for repairs, unless they are "for the purposes of expanding the facility or center, or increasing its bed capacity." Healey's proposal, which reduces the prison's footprint, would seem to slip the bill's net.

Healey's plan was met with anger from the abolitionist groups. "There is no such thing as a safe or trauma informed or healing prison for women, certainly not one run by this Department of Correction," Hanora said.

Some of the anger centers on sticker shock. "Our safety net for women cannot be a $360 million women's prison," she added. In reality, it's difficult to know whether $360 million is an exorbitant cost for a renovated prison. The original figure of $50 million predated the pandemic, further deterioration of MCI-Framingham, and a notable spike, nationwide, in building costs. "I mean, we're spending a million dollars a unit on public

housing," said Brownsberger when I asked him. (This might be an overestimate, but not by much.)

The female prisoners' fears about a more restrictive environment appear, at this early stage, not to have been borne out: The new prison will have "improved access to outdoor green spaces" and a "less institutional" design, according to a fact sheet circulated by the governor's office. Designed to house more than 200 women, it will have "community-style housing units in a campus-like setting."

Jasmin Borges, who was formerly incarcerated and is now director of organizing for Families for Justice as Healing, speaks during a town hall about MCI-Framingham in November. SOPHIE PARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

As the debate about the future of the justice system rages, the Commonwealth has continued to convict and imprison a small number of female offenders. A few days before Healey's announcement, Charlese Horton was sentenced to 25 years for assaulting and kidnapping a 14-year-old at gunpoint — twice. In October, Heather Wright-Craft was sentenced to 10 years for raping a 12-year-old. Both women are being held at MCI-Framingham.

Meanwhile, Families for Justice as Healing has not given up the fight. The group holds regular phone banking and canvassing events to rally community support in Framingham. In November, the group led a town hall at the McAuliffe Branch of the Framingham Library, a glassy modernist building on the north side of the city. The community room was full — three dozen chairs arranged in tight rows for the in-person crowd, with another 16 people logged in on Zoom. One woman had "Slava Ukraine,"

"Fight for Democracy," and "Vote" pins across her chartreuse puffer jacket, paired with an American-flag scarf. Lunch was laid out buffet-style in the back.

The proceedings were led by Hanora, who stood at the front with a sharp mullet, tattoos running down both arms, and a shirt emblazoned with the organization's logo, which is bookended by the scales of justice.

Loredana Leonard, a Framingham resident, holds a poster opposing the rebuilding of MCI-Framingham while welcoming an attendee to a town hall. SOPHIE PARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Hanora focused most intently on the tangible concerns of the Commonwealth's incarcerated women. But she never strayed too far from her vision of a "different path," as she put it. "There's no physical renovations that can repair the culture of the Department of Correction," she said.

That a world where "root causes" have been addressed and society has finally rethought the very utility of incarceration could emerge is not something she and her allies are going to give up soon, even as a sleek new prison is set to rise in the southeast corner of Framingham.

"If the only question that women are asked is do you want an old prison or a new prison, the answer is obviously a new prison," she said. "And there's a different way to frame the question, which is: *Do you want prison, or something better than a prison? What else is possible besides a prison?*"

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