

# The Star-Ledger

**Who is Jane Parnell? The powerful new monitor for N.J.'s troubled women's prison.**

By Blake Nelson

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Laurie Dawson was worried.

Around 2013 in Washington, an incarcerated friend was threatened by an officer, so Dawson wrote to the corrections department. Prisons can be black boxes of information, but Dawson got a call back from the facility's superintendent, who asked Dawson to join a volunteer advisory board.

The two ended up meeting regularly for the next two years.

"As a superintendent, she was willing to take the criticism and understand it," Dawson recalled in a recent interview.

Several years later and on the opposite coast, that administrator is now one of the most pivotal figures in a complex, and expensive, overhaul of New Jersey's scandal-plagued women's prison.

Jane Parnell officially became the federal monitor for the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility on Aug. 24, when a federal judge signed off on a consent decree between New Jersey and the U.S. Department of Justice.

For at least the next three years, Parnell will oversee reforms to reverse years of well-documented violence and sexual abuse at the Hunterdon County prison. She can make unannounced visits and has broad access to internal records. She'll write regular public reports, and neither New Jersey prison leaders nor the justice department will have oversight over those reviews.

While a federal judge has ultimate say over whether the prison meets its goals, the court's understanding of what's happening behind bars will be shaped by Parnell.

In interviews, people who worked with Parnell during a decades-long career in the Washington corrections system generally praised her as deliberative, a good listener and open to input from a variety of sources.

Her selection also illustrates how a network of well-connected consultants are influencing prison policy both locally and nationally.

Parnell is originally from the Pacific Northwest.

In 1974 she graduated from Central Washington University with a sociology degree, according to a school spokeswoman.

She joined the state payroll a few years later, where she made a good impression on Carol Porter.

In the 1980's, Porter led the Tacoma Pre-Release Center, which housed people nearing the end of their sentences. Parnell effectively supervised prisoners as a probation and parole officer, according to Porter, and later she helped develop a program to send officers into communities to meet people who couldn't easily travel.

When Porter took over the state's largest women's prison in 2006, she was glad to find Parnell already there as an associate superintendent.

The Washington Corrections Center for Women sits on a peninsula in Gig Harbor, about an hour south of Seattle. Its current capacity is around 900, similar to Edna Mahan, according to state data.

"She knew more about that facility than I did," Porter said. "She helped guide me through many things that were occurring on site."

Parnell once helped calm tensions among staff when a food manager fell under investigation, Porter said. Before that man left the job, Parnell both met with employees concerned about the investigation and clamped down on rumors.

Parnell was eventually promoted to lead two men's facilities, the Ahtanum View Corrections Center and later the Cedar Creek Correctional Center, according to spokeswoman Rachel Ericson.

During the summer of 2010, Parnell returned to the women's prison as superintendent.

The facility was over capacity the month she arrived, holding an average of 137 more people than it was supposed to.

While that problem persisted during her five-year tenure, the facility still hosted a range of programs, including Tedx speakers and college classes through the Freedom Education Project Puget Sound.

"She certainly cleared some paths ... for us to start the higher education prison program, and that's not always the case," said Tanya Erzen, a project founder and an associate research professor at the University of Puget Sound. "Would I say she is the most innovative, creative visionary I've ever worked with? I would say no, but I would say she was at least open to new programs and ideas."

Every week, Parnell walked through each unit with a notepad, according to Tanya Quinata, who was incarcerated at the facility from 2012 through 2019. Parnell wrote down any problems she saw and seemed to truly listen to prisoners, Quinata said.

When a snowstorm once closed a nearby bridge, a government newsletter reported that Parnell spent four nights at the facility to help compensate for the “skeleton staff.”

“She was the best superintendent while I was there,” Quinata said.

Parnell has spoken publicly about the need to care for incarcerated women differently than men.

“You don’t have much power, you don’t have much control, and so little things take on a huge significance,” she once told a reporter with the public radio station KUOW. Even inexpensive changes, like offering better clothing, could have significant ripple effects, she said. “If we can address those small things, then women can focus on those bigger issues, things like: What brought them to prison in the first place?”

When reached by phone, Parnell declined an interview request, citing the consent decree. (The agreement does block her from talking about Edna Mahan without approval from the court, although it doesn’t explicitly prohibit speaking about other topics.)

Parnell retired in 2015. She became a consultant for The Moss Group the year after.

The Washington D.C. firm advises prison leaders nationwide, and she’s since done work in New Mexico, conducted training in Pennsylvania and advised Los Angeles County how to better care for women who’ve experienced trauma, according to local and state organizations. Another federal monitor hired her to develop a staffing plan for a notorious women’s facility in Alabama, according to court records.

Last year, New Jersey also hired The Moss Group to help negotiate reforms with the justice department.

The consent decree bars Parnell from accepting consulting work that would create a “conflict of interest” with her monitoring job, and she has not been part of Moss’ work with Edna Mahan, according to Donna Deutsch, the firm’s business development director.

As of October, Parnell was only wrapping up some “minimal work” for the firm outside the state, Deutsch wrote in an email.

Parnell is also tied to Personal Development Consultants, Inc., a for-profit Washington firm formed to advise both public and private organizations. Annual reports show Parnell’s been part of the group since at least 1999 and she’s listed as president in the firm’s most recent disclosure, but state records offer few additional details.

As monitor, Parnell reports to U.S. District Judge Zahid Quraishi.

Although she is not a state employee, New Jersey taxpayers still foot her \$200 an hour fee.

While much of her work in the coming months will be remote, her first two visits to Edna Mahan were scheduled for October, according to court filings.

Public records show that Parnell lives in Washington, so she budgeted \$800 for airfare, \$700 for a rental car and more than \$1,000 for a hotel, among other expenses.

Consent decree costs can cause friction with local leaders. Newark police are under a similar agreement, and that city's mayor has publicly clashed with their monitor over how long federal oversight should last.

Representatives for New Jersey prisons and the justice department declined to say why they agreed to hire Parnell, but it can't hurt that her first-year budget (more than \$184,000) is well below the quarter-million dollar maximum set by the agreement. Furthermore, her rate is significantly less than what outside lawyers are charging to defend the state against multiple lawsuits alleging abuse behind bars.

Parnell is currently reviewing New Jersey prison policies, and officials aim to finish rewrites by August 2022.

The consent decree also requires regular public meetings, and the first is tentatively scheduled for February, according to a prison spokeswoman.

It will be up to Parnell whether to attend.

*NJ Advance Media Research Editor Vinessa Erminio contributed to this report.*