



## Quarterly Update | December 2023

Creating A Safer Montana Through Accountability, Rehabilitation & Empowerment

# Parent Reunification Program Offers Slice of Holiday Life

Inside a tiny red house on the grounds of Montana State Prison, Michael Conway and his family were just the Conway family. They didn't think about the breast cancer Conway's wife recently beat, and how Conway would stay behind in Deer Lodge while his family went back to Butte in a few, short hours. For a time during the Connecting Adults and Minors through Positive Parenting (CAMPP) Montana program, the Conways were just a family.

At the CAMPP MT house, the holiday spirit was in full swing as three families visited their incarcerated fathers. In the main room, a Christmas tree was set up with presents next to a cardboard fireplace with a Santa figure sitting on top. Later, each child would have their own gift - wrapped by their dad - to open with their family.

"I know it's minuscule to a lot of people, but it meant the world to be able to wrap a present for my son," Conway said. "You can talk about how much you care about somebody, but to show them how you care for them is a whole different thing. And that's something that I can do to show him that I love him and that I was thinking



*The Conway family opens presents together during the December CAMPP MT event at Montana State Prison. Every child received a gift during the visit that was wrapped by their dad.*

about him even when he wasn't here. And he knows that I love him, but it's just something else that I could do, and it meant the world to me."

The CAMPP MT program was established at MSP in 2019. The grant-funded program's goal is to initiate the reunification process for incarcerated fathers and their minor children in a positive and structured environment. In many cases, the children involved in the program are in foster care.

To enroll in the program, inmates must send a message to the CAMPP MT coordinator, Cienna Crichton, expressing their interest. If

an inmate passes the screening process and completes an interview, Crichton reaches out to the involved children's supervising guardian to see if they want to get involved in the program. If the guardian consents, the father must participate in parenting classes at which time contact is made between parent and child.

The program grant covers the cost of hotel rooms for families to travel to town for a two-day visit. Crichton said these meetings are a magical experience.

"You can feel the love in the room," she said. "Just them getting to rejoice with their

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# The Last Mile Graduates First Cohort at MSP

Seventeen students graduated from the inaugural The Last Mile (TLM) web development program at Montana State Prison on Sept. 28. The cohort spent the last year learning technology skills including web development, coding, and software engineering to prepare them for high-demand jobs when they return to Montana communities.

“The Last Mile gave me purpose and helped me to see something in myself that I did not see before,” student Clarence Cook said. “Meeting the challenges raised my self-esteem. The Last Mile gave me tools to have a career in web design when I get out.”

Students in the program learn different aspects of software development training in two, six-month sections. Initially, they learn web development fundamentals like HTML and Javascript, and in the second half, they learn Mongo Express React Node, or the server side of coding.

The Last Mile is one of the newest DOC education programs offered through Montana Correctional Enterprises. After graduation from the program and leaving DOC supervision, the hope is for students to integrate back into their communities and find a job with a high-tech company.

“We are extremely proud of the individuals



who dedicated themselves this past year to The Last Mile coding program,” said DOC Director Brian Gootkin. “When these students return to their Montana communities, they’ll be able to provide for themselves and their families with a high-paying career in the state’s growing tech industry.”

This program is the first of its kind in the state of Montana. Initial funding came from generous contributions from supporters, most notably, the Gianforte Family Foundation. TLM’s mission is to achieve an impact similar to what has been realized in the states in which TLM operates.

Gianforte Family Foundation Executive Director Catherine Koenen said. “We’re pleased to partner with The Last Mile in providing not just education and high-tech training, but also hope for some of our most vulnerable residents and their families.”

The Last Mile (TLM) is the leading provider of technology training programs and transitional support for incarcerated people across the country.

“We celebrate the success of this first cohort at Montana State Prison and look forward to partnering with companies to provide TLM returned citizens with opportunities for apprenticeships and employment,” said Chris Redlitz, executive director of The Last Mile. “Together, we are forging a path towards broader career opportunities and a more just and hopeful future for justice impacted individuals.”

After their program completion, TLM’s Reentry Team supports individuals based on personalized plans to prepare them for a successful transition leading up to, as well as after, their release date. TLM graduates have an 85% employment rate within 6 months of release, largely with the support of TLM’s fair chance hiring partners in the business, media and tech industries. Fair chance hiring is when an organization evaluates and hires candidates for roles based on their qualified skills as opposed to their history or record. These opportunities reduce recidivism and develop a stronger workforce in Montana.



## In-Person Visitation Resumes at Montana State Prison

Regular visitation resumed at Montana State Prison in December, just in time for the holiday season.

“We’re thrilled to be able to return to a regular schedule for visitation at MSP, especially at this important time of year,” said DOC Deputy Director Cynthia Wolken. “In addition, our Visitation team has developed a more equitable process for scheduling to ensure family and friends have greater opportunity to visit with their loved ones.”

To allow for even distribution of visiting opportunities, the DOC has implemented a short waiting period after family and friends book a visit to make sure other visitors have an opportunity to schedule. In addition, inmates may have only one visit per week with up to five visitors per visit.

Visitation times for units will also rotate to ensure family and friends who can’t visit at one time of day can schedule for a different block when the schedule changes.

In-person visitation was suspended in October 2022 when correctional officer staffing vacancies climbed to 36%, and then increased to 40%. As of early December, the vacancy rate had decreased to 2.3%, allowing the facility to staff visitation in a safe and secure manner.

For MSP’s visitation schedule, visit <https://cor.mt.gov/FriendsandFamily/In-Person-Visitation>.

## DOC Inmates Moved to Arizona Correctional Facility

One-hundred-and-twenty Montana Department of Corrections (DOC) inmates were transported to Saguaro Correctional Center in Arizona in November and December as part of an effort to relieve overcrowding pressure at Montana State Prison (MSP).

“This transfer of inmates to CoreCivic’s correctional facility in Eloy, Arizona went smoothly thanks to the hard work of everyone involved,” said DOC Director Brian Gookin. “By freeing up this space at MSP, the DOC can more effectively manage inmate populations in our facilities and jails around the state, better ensuring improved safety and security for the public.”

In 2023, Montana legislators passed and Governor Greg Gianforte signed HB 817, delivering \$3.9 million for each year of the biennium to pay for the 120 temporary prison beds.

The funding for the beds was part of a commitment from legislators and the governor to invest in long-needed improvements to the state’s corrections system. This included the governor’s successful proposal for \$228 million in infrastructure projects at MSP to make the facility safer and increase its capacity; expansion of the DOC’s community corrections resources; and more.

According to Gookin, the DOC team worked to ensure the services available to inmates at Saguaro Correctional Center are comparable to what is available in Montana facilities including

health care needs, treatment resources, inmate communications with family and friends, educational opportunities for high school equivalency diplomas through HiSET, and vocational training.

DOC staff selected inmates for transfer based on a variety of factors including whether they wanted to volunteer for the move; custody level; proximity to parole eligibility (more than two years); participation in treatment and other programming; and health/mental health needs.

MSP has been operating over capacity for more than a year.

In 2023, Montana legislators assigned the HB 5 Select Committee to review corrections facility capacity and system development and provide recommendations for the 2025 Montana Legislature.



# Montana Department of Corrections' 2023 Governor's Award for Excellence in Performance Recipients



## Russ Ostwalt – DOC Firearms Training

As lead firearms instructor for the DOC, Probation and Parole Officer II Russ Ostwalt is always looking for ways to improve the department's firearms program. Not only did he develop the Probation and Parole Basic Firearms course as a program that teaches all skill levels and uses the most up-to-date methods consistently throughout the DOC, but he became a master firearms instructor and master instructor development instructor. Because of these designations, he can teach new instructors and develop a team to effectively and efficiently deliver training throughout the DOC.



## Gracie Survival Tactics Team

Alexandra Holmes, Sean Ibsen, Ernest Medow

When the DOC decided to use the Gracie Model for teaching defensive tactics department-wide, this team came together to successfully implement the program at DOC facilities and in the Probation and Parole Bureau. Probation and Parole Officers Ernest Medow and Sean Ibsen agreed to become certified instructors and coordinated with Alexandra Holmes with the Training Skills and Advancement Team to effectively bring the training to DOC employees.



## MSP Recruitment and Retention Team

Capt. Howie Wigert; Lieutenants Jeff McNabb, Ben Jamieson, Colter Olhausen; Sgt. Robert Brown; Correctional Officers Nick Moe, Kassandra Flores, Kira Grigsby; HR Recruiting and Retention Specialist Jonadel Ehret; HR Generalist Jared Hardman; Communication Director Carolynn Stocker; Public Information Officer Alex Klapmeier

When the correctional officer vacancy rate at Montana State Prison hit 40% in December 2022, this team was assembled to explore new ways to recruit and retain individuals to fill those positions. A year later, that vacancy rate decreased to 2.3%. Their efforts included a reduction in the time required to interview and hire candidates; a high-contact approach to recruitment; job shadowing; mentoring; social media; and more.



## New Tablets Expand Opportunities for Inmates

This fall, inmates at Montana Department of Corrections secure facilities received an upgrade in the way they communicate with family and friends, access educational materials, and take in entertainment.

Through an amendment to the DOC’s contract with its communications provider, ICSolutions, each inmate at Montana State Prison, Montana Women’s Prison, and Pine Hills Correctional Facility received their own tablet to use. Previously, tablets were provided to inmates on a rotating basis.

“With the new tablets and technology that came with them, inmates can make phone calls to their family and friends, participate in video visitation, and send and receive messages,” said John Daugherty, DOC’s Central Services chief executive officer. “The tablets also provide free educational and entertainment options, along with the opportunity to purchase other content.”

To support the new technology, ICSolutions completed significant upgrades to wifi capability at DOC facilities to ensure the best accessibility possible.

According to Daugherty, ICSolutions works extensively with departments of corrections throughout the nation and understands the unique requirements of the DOC in terms of security.

“As is the case in anything the DOC does, safety and security are primary considerations,” Daugherty said. “Inmates can’t access the Internet and we are able to turn off connectivity when we need to, like in emergency situations.”

Also included in the contract amendments was a decrease in calling rates from 10 cents/minute to 6 cents/minute. Inmates continue to receive one free phone call in addition to a 10-minute video visitation each week.

“It’s clear that maintaining contacts with family and friends helps inmates prepare for, and successfully re-enter, Montana communities,” Daugherty said. “We’re happy to provide this enhanced opportunity to allow them to do that.”



## Not Your Granny’s Crafts: Youth Residents Learn to Crochet

The pile of baby blankets donated to the Holy Rosary Healthcare Hospital Labor and Delivery unit in Miles City didn’t come from a group of dedicated grannies. These special blankets for the newest members of eastern Montana’s community were crocheted by the youth residents at Pine Hills Correctional Facility.

This summer, Pine Hills Sgt. Melody Schwartz approached her coworkers and bosses about teaching the youth residents how to crochet.

“At the facility I worked at in Oregon, the kids there learned how to crochet blankets,” she said. “It was a great way for them to stay busy and occupied. I thought our residents here could really benefit from it as well and have something to keep their hands busy.”

Residents started by crocheting blankets for themselves. Schwartz said she would teach one youth resident, he would teach another resident, and soon everyone in the unit was spending their afternoons crocheting. Schwartz said many of the residents kept their initial blankets because it was the “nicest thing they owned.”

The program has been so successful, it is now included in Pine Hills’ restorative justice classes. Other restorative justice classes at Pine

Hills include maintaining the park next to the facility. Both projects are an opportunity for residents at PHCF to give back.

Superintendent Steve Ray said he’s pleasantly surprised about the enthusiasm the youth residents have demonstrated for crocheting.

“One of them said, ‘I can’t wait to get home and crochet with my grandma.’ I never thought I’d walk into the unit and see them all

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# MWP Inmates Learn Dog Training, Grooming Skills in Pre-apprenticeship

In the Montana Women’s Prison, Tasha Lopez runs through a series of commands with a bouncing black and white Australian Shepard named Pilot. The duo works through the 10 commands of the Canine Good Citizen list, which include staying for a meet and greet, walking on a leash, and sitting while the owner walks away. Lopez is one of 19 women participating in Prison Paws, a dog training and grooming program.

Prison Paws is a pre-apprenticeship with the Montana Department of Labor that has graduated 22 inmate students in the dog training program and four in the dog grooming program.

“It’s exciting for the women at MWP to gain a pre-apprenticeship credential along with impacting Montanans across the state with the skills they learn in this program,” DOC Director Brian Gootkin said. “Our Montana Correctional Enterprises team does a great job finding programs that will benefit

inmates at our DOC facilities. We’ve seen at Montana State Prison how the men benefit from caring for the ranch animals, and our women get the same benefits from the dogs in the Prison Paws program.”

The two tracks require considerable work and dedication.

Women spend six months in the dog trainer program. The entire program is 182 hours of classroom, practical, and on-the-job learning. Some of the information covered includes training dogs for basic manners and socialization with people and dogs, keeping records for the dogs, feeding the dogs, and conditioning them to respond to verbal cues and hand signals.

The dog grooming program is a year-long course. The women spend 344 hours between classroom and hands-on experience. Students learn the safe handling and restraint of pets on the

grooming table and in the bathing area, to recognize possible canine health issues associated with their skin and coat, sanitation of equipment, and other skills.

Tamera Chamberlain said it’s a full-time job working in the Prison Paws program, but she loves working with the dogs and making an impact.

“These are members of the community’s family,” she said. “It gives us a sense of purpose, and we work really hard with them. It’s fun to see the end result of what we did to get them where they are from the beginning to the end.”



## DOC Activities Raise Funds During SECGC

In addition to Montana Department of Corrections employees’ contributions to the State Employee Charitable Giving Campaign (SECGC) this fall, employees raised \$3,700 for a variety of local causes.

The SECGC is an annual opportunity for state employees to donate to organizations of their choice via payroll deduction, cash, check, credit, or debit card. The DOC raises extra funds through events at each facility or office beyond the promoted payroll deductions.

Area nonprofits that will benefit include Intermountain in Helena, Lewis & Clark Humane Society in Helena, William K. Kohrs Memorial Library in Deer Lodge, Custer County Food Bank in Miles City and the Rialto Community Theater in Deer Lodge. The funds were raised through a variety of activities like bingo, a virtual bake sale, and facility-specific events.

DOC Project Management Bureau Chief Kathy Ralston has served as the DOC SECGC coordinator for the past four years.



**State Employees  
Charitable Giving  
Campaign**

“This has been such a wonderful experience

to work with the staff at all the DOC facilities and offices,” Ralston said. “I am overwhelmed by the generosity everyone shows each year during the campaign and have found the DOC has the most generous people who believe in giving back to the communities of Montana.”

Since 1990, Montana state employees have donated more than \$10 million to nonprofits in the state. This year, DOC employees have donated more than \$10,000 to the SECGC. Overall, the SECGC has received more than \$360,000 in donations from state employees.

“I’ve seen firsthand how giving our employees are of their time and energy, and this is just another great example of their giving spirit,” DOC Director Brian Gootkin said. “It’s amazing to see the impact we can have in different parts of Montana from Kalispell all the way to Miles City. I’m honored to work with this amazing group of giving people.”



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families again is quite the experience that we take for granted every day when we're with our families. This is really for the kids. They absolutely love seeing their dads. They miss them, and it's a great thing to be a part of."

Throughout the morning, Tara Conway and her four kids partake in various CAMPP MT activities. They make mini snow globes, tie-dye shirts, and visit with baby cows from the MSP ranch outside. Tara watches as her husband gives basketball advice to one of his twin daughters and then gets to throw a softball around outside with the other.

This year, visits with her husband feel extra special due to the medical issues Tara faced.



*Elliana Sadler poses for a photo with her dad, William Sadler, at the CAMPP MT house at Montana State Prison. The visit, which took place in December, was an opportunity for dads in the Connecting Adults and Minors through Positive Parenting (CAMPP) program to celebrate the holidays with their children.*



*The Halford family works on tie-dye shirts during the December CAMPP MT event at Montana State Prison. During the visit, families made gingerbread houses, decorated ornaments and made tie-dye shirts.*

"This one hit really hard because I just beat breast cancer, and as a mom, when you get that diagnosis, you think, 'Is this going to be the last birthday or Christmas?' and with him being here, it makes it even worse," said Tara. "To have a little piece of Christmas as a family is the biggest blessing I could ask for."

Elliana's Saddle's dad, William, has been in and out of MSP over the years. She hasn't done a visit inside the prison before, but she knows how valuable these in-person visits are with her dad.

"It's pretty special to be able to visit my dad," she said. "I don't get to see him much. I kind of need a dad because it would be really hard if I wasn't able to see him. So, I'm glad that they have this CAMPP so I can see my dad and do activities with him."

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crocheting," Ray said. "All the kids are really into it and it's interesting to see their hands and minds are busy in a constructive way."

Aside from the hospital, the residents' blankets have also made their way to the Outreach Clinic of Miles City. The group is currently busy making more blankets for youth in foster care..

Another officer involved in the project is Gracia Orlett. She works on the youth unit with Schwartz and knew how to crochet, so it piqued her interest from the start. Orlett said she's enjoyed seeing how it has helped the youth.

"I think this is a great activity for the youth to be involved in as it brings out a lot of different skills for them and gives them a hobby that fills their time instead of negativity," she said. "Crocheting

has helped a lot of the youth as it has been found to have several psychological benefits, including reducing stress and anxiety, increasing feelings of relaxation and mindfulness, and providing a sense of accomplishment."

Stanley Teagan, the principal at Pine Hill, said she's seen a difference in the classroom with the youth students. She said incidents during school have decreased and that it's contributed to a positive culture on campus.

One of the students shared his thoughts on the program.

"I am able to control my ADHD a lot better since crocheting keeps my hands busy and passes the time. Overall, it's a really good thing for me."



400 copies of this public document were published at an estimated cost of \$1.748 per copy, for a total cost of \$699.30, which includes \$184.00 for printing and \$883.30 for distribution.

