



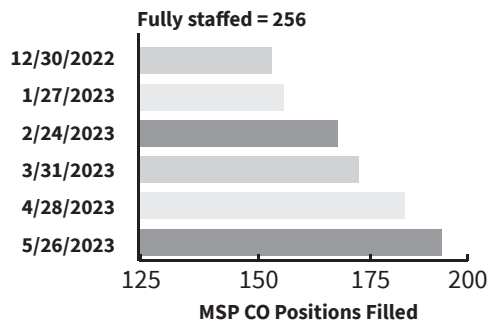
# MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

## Quarterly Update | June 2023

Creating A Safer Montana Through Accountability, Rehabilitation & Empowerment

### Recruitment and Retention: Working the challenge as a team

The Montana Department of Corrections' Montana State Prison (MSP) is far from unique when it comes to its struggles to attract and retain correctional officers; departments of corrections across the nation are fighting the same battle. However, over the past year, the DOC has adopted a new recruitment and retention model that is giving MSP the boost it needs.



“At our most difficult time – in December 2022 – MSP was sitting at a 40% vacancy rate among correctional officers,” DOC Director Brian Gootkin said. “We knew we had to do something different. Today, we’re approaching a 20% vacancy rate.”

According to Gootkin, the downward trend the DOC is seeing related to its correctional officer vacancy rate can’t be attributed to just one factor. Instead, the department’s progress involves a number of considerations.

#### Support from the Governor and legislators

“The support of Governor Gianforte and recognition by Montana legislators have been monumental,” Gootkin said. “Thanks



to their efforts, the starting wage for correctional officers at MSP has increased from \$16.46/hour at the start of 2022, to \$24.01/hour beginning July 1, 2024. In addition, lawmakers carved out about \$255 million for infrastructure improvements at DOC secure facilities. This type of investment helps to retain our current employees and hire quality employees.”

#### Dedicated recruitment team

And then there’s the group Gootkin refers to as the heart of the operation. The department’s Recruitment and Retention (R&R) team at MSP was established in December 2022 and received its orders to help transform the recruitment process. Individuals on the team represent a wide swath of

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# Incarcerated students succeeding in new education programs

Jerold Weller has been in prison most of his adult life and his grandchildren are his inspiration for improving himself. At the Montana Department of Corrections, inmates like Weller can improve themselves through several education programs. The two newest opportunities are The Last Mile coding program and participating in college courses with financial aid through the Second Chance Pell Grant Program.

Weller was one of 19 inmates selected to participate in The Last Mile.

“My children have grown up without me. I’m a long-distance father if that’s even a thing,” Weller said. “My grandchildren have been born since I’ve been in here, and I have an opportunity to be there for them. And I don’t want to fail my grandkids like I failed my children. So, this is giving me that opportunity. I believe that.”

The Last Mile prepares incarcerated individuals for successful reentry through business and technology training. Students in the program learn different aspects of software development training in two, six-month sections. First, 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.

Classes started at MSP on Sept. 19, 2022 with 19 students. For the capstone projects



Helena College graduates display their certificates of Applied Science.

in March, students presented their projects to demonstrate their ability to use and develop technology in web development fundamentals, client-side programming, HTML, Java Script, and Cascading Style Sheets. Some of these projects included a pizza store website, an app for after-hour daycare and a video game.

While the TLM participants reached the half-way mark in their studies, nine students at MSP graduated from Helena College with certificates of Applied Science in Automotive Technology.

The U.S. Department of Education selected Helena College, Great Falls College, Montana State University Billings, and Dawson Community College to provide postsecondary instruction to incarcerated students at MSP as part of the Second Chance Pell

program. Prior to the establishment of the Second Chance Pell program, individuals in prison were not eligible to receive federal financial aid.

“Every person who comes to us should leave with the opportunities and skills to never come back to us,” DOC Deputy Director Cynthia Wolken said. “Postsecondary education is one of the pathways we provide to help incarcerated individuals achieve success after release and limit the risk of recidivism. We’re extremely proud of the students who worked so hard to earn their certificates and are thankful to our DOC staff and partners in the education community who contributed to making this opportunity a reality for them and future classes.”



Jerold Weller, incarcerated student

“Every person who comes to us should leave with the opportunities and skills to never come back to us.”  
 ~DOC Deputy Director Cynthia Wolken

# 68th Montana Legislative Session: Historic for DOC

The 68th Montana Legislative Session was a historic one for the Montana Department of Corrections, resulting in financial investments by lawmakers into employee wages and about \$255 million in infrastructure (physical and technology) projects designed to equip the department’s facilities and operations for the future.

“We are extremely thankful to Governor Gianforte and legislators for their support of the department and its efforts on behalf of Montana citizens,” Deputy Director Cynthia Wolken said. “The much-needed increase in wages and investment in infrastructure will help ensure safer, more efficient working environments for the people who do these important and challenging jobs every day.”

Related to employee wages, HB 2 and HB 3 provided for correctional officer wage increases of \$2/hr at Montana State Prison and \$3/hr at Montana Women’s Prison and Pine Hills Correctional Facility (leveling the rates among those facilities). HB 13 included raises for all state employees. To put the impact of this in perspective, starting wages for correctional officers will be \$24.01/hour on July 1, 2024 compared with the \$16.46/hour they were receiving at MSP at the beginning of 2022.

Physical infrastructure projects funded by the legislature through a variety of bills – most notably, HB 5 - include:

- Inmate housing replacement and renovation on MSP’s low-security side
- Multi-purpose programming building on MSP’s high-security side
- Staff services addition to MSP’s Wallace Building
- Enhancements for MSP’s check-point and entrance

Also, the department received funding for numerous, much-needed maintenance projects at our facilities including new roofs, perimeter fence improvements, and sewer line replacements.

To help alleviate pressure on local detention centers and state prison facilities, legislators supported the creation of 51 prerelease beds state-wide, along with funding the establishment of a new, 60-bed prerelease center in Kalispell. Slated for FY25 is the development of a 68-bed sex offender program to improve supports for this challenging segment of the department’s population as they prepare to transition back into Montana communities.

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# The Bag Lady: Employee combines “fashion” and security at MSP

Elvie Wells is known by her friends at Montana State Prison as “the bag lady.” Wells, who is the hobby supervisor at MSP, turned one of her own hobbies into a business by sewing clear vinyl totes for employees who work in the secure facility.

“I made one first for myself, and then somebody else saw it and said, ‘Why don’t you make them for us?’” Wells said with a smile. “I started making them and made a couple designs. A lot of people like them because I make them adorable and accessible.”

Safety and security are priorities at Montana Department of Corrections’ secure facilities. To diminish the risk of contraband being smuggled into a facility in someone’s bag, employees use clear, vinyl bags to carry the items they need for their shifts. While all belongings are checked closely when employees arrive for the day, having their items in a clear bag helps expedite the process.

Wells first learned how to sew on her mother’s push pedal machine in the Philippines, altering her clothes due to her petite stature. She developed the designs for the bags herself after looking at some examples online. Doing a quick scan of



*Elvie Wells displays clear vinyl totes she sews for employees who work in secure facilities.*

the Wallace Building, the main administration building at MSP, one can see Wells’ creations everywhere.

“It feels so good,” she said. “They’ll say, ‘Elvie, I have had this bag that I bought from you for three years now.’ I say, ‘Yay, that’s good!’ That’s what the purpose is. I like it stronger than if you buy a cheaper bag. It feels good when they like my bags.”

Wells has a variety of sizes she can craft, but for MSP, she makes a lot of backpacks, messenger bags, and small tote sizes. It takes three hours to make one bag. The bags

can also be personalized with the buyer’s fabric of choice, like sports teams or specific patterns.

The MSP seamstress, who has worked for the department for 12 years, also offers her services to expecting mothers at MSP by offering alterations to uniforms.

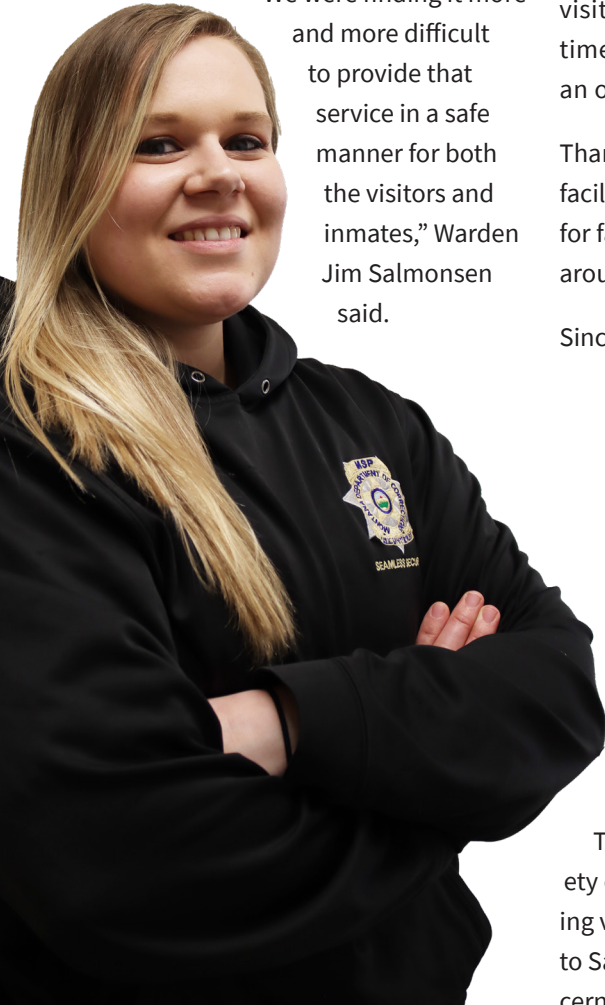
“I forget everything outside, and you’re focused on your work,” Wells said. “If you don’t focus on what you’re sewing, you make a mistake. It’s like my therapy for me to leave all the stress outside, and I can do some sewing. It’s therapeutic for me.”



# Maintaining connections: MSP staff volunteer for special visitation duty

It was a challenging decision for the Montana Department of Corrections to suspend visitation at MSP in October 2022.

“We were finding it more and more difficult to provide that service in a safe manner for both the visitors and inmates,” Warden Jim Salmonsén said.



Michelle McDonald, Visitation Officer

“That’s what led to our suspension of visitation at the time. We’re trying to do visits every two months, and the people working the visiting aren’t the normal visiting officers. They are people taking time out of their day and volunteering for an overtime shift.”

Thanks to numerous employees at MSP, the facility has hosted three visitation sessions for family members and inmates scheduled around holidays.

Since October, MSP has hosted three visits.

- Nov. 19-20 - 75 inmates received 143 visitors
- Dec. 17-18 - 96 inmates received 185 visitors
- April 22-23 - 104 inmates received 225 visitors.

In June, the facility will host its fourth visitation in honor of Father’s Day.

The DOC considered a variety of factors before suspending visitation at MSP. According to Salmonsén, the primary concern was ensuring the facility

could still operate and keep the public, staff members, and inmates safe. In addition, the department wanted to prioritize activities like hobby and recreation because a larger number of inmates participate in those than participate in visitation.

When the security staff asked for employees to help staff special visitations, correctional officers and other workers were quick to step up.

“We have some very selfless employees at the Department of Corrections, and these folks who volunteered for overtime shifts for visitation are shining examples of the good people we have,” DOC Director Brian Gootkin said. “We understand how important it is for offenders to connect with their family and loved ones. Our correctional officer numbers are improving every week, but we’re not quite at the point where we can resume regular visitation. We’re hopeful that isn’t too far in the future.”

“They are people taking time out of their day and volunteering for an overtime shift.”  
 ~MSP Warden Jim Salmonsén



## OMS Modernization Project update

The Montana Department of Corrections is poised to take the next step in its Offender Management System modernization project thanks to a decision by lawmakers in the 68th Montana Legislative Session to dedicate \$17.7 million to the effort.

The department’s contract with consultant Berry Dunn McNeil and Parker to research and compile crucial information for the development of a Request for Proposals for the OMS is near completion.

As part of its work:

- The team reviewed more than 2,000 documents and about 260 responses from a department-wide survey. Berry Dunn also conducted nearly 30 group interviews with stakeholders resulting in the development of a Needs Assessment report that describes 115 challenges and 62 recommendations related to the OMS project.

- Completed a business process requirements document that includes a narrative of current business process with workflow diagrams.
- Created a functional and technical requirements document, which describes 778 core functional requirements that are needed by all people using the system and 945 non-core functional and technical requirements. (Non-core functional requirements are those that are needed by business areas. For example, there are 31 general functional requirements for Sentence and Time Accounting that are unique to that module.)

Other documents completed and/or in draft are system interfaces, implementation options and timelines, and a cost-benefit analysis.

The department is close to completion of the Request for Proposal (RFP) and anticipates that will be completed in June. Once the RFP

is complete, the department will work with the Montana Department of Administration to get the RFP published.

“So far, this has been an extremely interesting process as people from all areas of the department work together to identify the strengths and needs related to this type of system,” said John Daugherty, DOC’s chief executive officer of Central Services. “Once we select a vendor, we know implementation won’t be a quick or easy effort, but the end result will be a system that improves the department’s efficiency and effectiveness.”



*John Daugherty, chief executive officer of Central Services*

## Congratulations Lt. Nancy Sharkey & Melissa Scharf, RN



Recently, two Department of Corrections employees were recognized by the American Correctional Association (ACA) and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). Lt. Nancy Sharkey at Montana State Prison (MSP) was recognized as the Montana Correctional Worker of the Year and Melissa Scharf at MSP was named the Montana Nurse of the Year. The ACA is the national association for correctional professionals.

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disciplines from within the department including correctional officers, prison administrators, human resources, public relations, the DOC’s executive team, and more.

Through its work, the team has:

- streamlined the hiring process from more than a month to, in most cases, a matter of days;
- cultivated different groups of potential hires, including graduating high school students, former MSP employees, part-time and seasonal workers, etc.; and
- established tours and a job shadow program to allow recruits to form realistic expectations for what the work entails.

MSP Capt. Howard Wigert, team leader, believes placing potential recruits on the path to a rewarding career with the DOC begins with the first recruitment contact and doesn’t end once they are employed by the department.

“It’s that personal contact,” he said. “I take calls from (potential recruits) all the time when we’re getting them in here. Then once



*“The progress we are seeing is a definite win, and we look forward to using what we’ve learned to attract and retain recruits in other challenging areas.”*

**~DOC Director Brian Gootkin**

they are here, I check in with them and so do other members of the team. We want them to feel welcome and answer any questions they might have.”

Beyond the required New Employee Orientation training, team members provide support to new hires by teaching them how to properly wear their uniforms and equipment; checking in with them weekly about any questions or concerns; and ensuring they are establishing connections at MSP and the community.

**Retaining employees**

In addition to providing support to recruits, the DOC took the step to assign mentors to its new and existing correctional officers. Mentors received training in how to advise their assigned officers and connect with them on a regular basis.

This consistent contact dovetails with the DOC’s efforts to shift its workplace culture to one of accountability - not blame - al-

lowing for more open and meaningful discussion of systemic issues.

“We want everyone who works here to feel like family,” Warden Jim Salmons said. “We all need to look out for each other, and the steps we’re taking are important for that. We have a great team and this makes us stronger.”

Gootkin recognizes the hard work surrounding recruitment and retention is far from over, but he’s proud of the change that is taking place.

“The progress we are seeing is a definite win, and we look forward to using what we’ve learned to attract and retain recruits in other challenging areas,” he said. “We needed the right people dedicated to keeping our current officers and bringing in quality people.”



# Probation and Parole officers find community camaraderie through volunteering

It all started for Great Falls Probation and Parole Officer Cory Purves when a family friend invited him to watch his son compete in the Special Olympics.

“I threw on my vest, talked to a couple of other officers about coming, and we spent a couple of days there. I got hooked,” Purves said. “It hooks you, and it tugs at your heartstrings.”

For several Montana Department of Corrections Probation and Parole offices, participating in events with Special Olympics Montana allows them to become involved in their local communities and make an impact on the athletes.

Special Olympics Montana has 2,000 athletes registered in 121 programs across 65 cities involving around 4,000 volunteers. The organization holds athletic opportunities for athletes with intellectual disabilities.

Over the past six years, Purves and his co-workers have volunteered at athletic events in Great Falls. They help pass out medals with other law enforcement agencies and assist where needed. Purves said the involvement is good for building connections between the DOC and other local agencies.

“We’re all part of a team and building that camaraderie between all law enforcement agencies is a good thing,” Purves said. “It’s also beneficial for the DOC to get our name out there and participate in community functions. It lets the community know what we do and who we are. By making ourselves visible, they’re not afraid of us and not apprehensive about talking to us.”

Four hours away in Billings, Karri Eik and her coworkers also participate in Special Olympics Montana activities. The Billings office has participated in the Law Enforcement Torch Run and Tip A Cop events. This spring, the office helped carry the Special Olympics Torch with



(L to R): PO Rachel Ordonez, PO Heather Edwards, PO2 Karri Eik, PSI Writer Laura McKee.

other local law enforcement officers from Billings to Big Timber.

Eik said it’s inspiring to work with all the athletes.

“Our past deputy chief had a big heart for it, so it just kind of spread it down to the rest of the office,” she said. “They’re just great events to bring law enforcement agencies together in a non-work environment. It’s fun and gets us to interact with each other outside of work functions.”

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“We’re also extremely pleased the legislature provided \$17.7 million to contract for the development and implementation of a new offender management system (OMS),” Wolken said. “Our existing system has reached its limits and we can now work with vendors to deliver an OMS that will allow us to integrate numerous processes, along with capture enhanced data to guide our efforts related to recidivism and more.”

The department’s lift in terms of policy bills was relatively light compared to recent ses-

sions, according to Wolken. She added that the policy bills passed will benefit not only the department, but its community partners as well.

### Bills passed:

- Allow coroners who are peace officers to conduct inquests regarding deaths in prisons or correctional facilities;
- Exempt barbering services provided at state correctional facilities and county detention centers from licensing requirements;

- Codify the manner inmates’ trust account funds and personal property are distributed after an inmate dies while incarcerated; and
- Authorize correctional officers on state correctional facility property to detain an individual if they have reasonable suspicion a person is committing or has committed certain crimes (escape, transferring illegal articles, trespass) or is aiding and abetting an offender in those crimes.



# DOC Inaugural Leadership Retreat: Resiliency, networking, and more

From learning how to foster greater resiliency in their personal and professional lives, to hearing from a returned citizen about the importance of the work they do, Montana Department of Corrections’ leaders say the inaugural DOC Leadership Retreat in June was a success.

About 70 leaders including executive team members, bureau chiefs, and managers/supervisors converged at the Finlen Hotel in Butte to network, train, and share information.

Keynote Speaker Lorca Smetana, a survivor of the 1986 Mt. Hood tragedy which claimed the lives of nine individuals, spoke to the team about resiliency. She compared an individual’s resiliency to a mountain lake, with the water level rising and falling due to a variety of causes. Smetana encouraged retreat attendees to identify what factors filled and depleted their “lakes,” and offered techniques to manage those.

“Corrections is a demanding type of work, and the potential for burnout is high,” said Deputy Director Cynthia Wolken, who organized the retreat. “We want to make sure we are providing members of our team with the tools they need to manage the ups

and downs that inevitably come with the work we do.”

In addition, attendees participated in team building exercises; received an update on Collaborative Safety training from consultant Scott Modell; listened to a panel discussion about DOC culture; heard from the DOC executive team about legislative successes; were introduced to the Integrated Correctional Program Model (ICPM); and more.

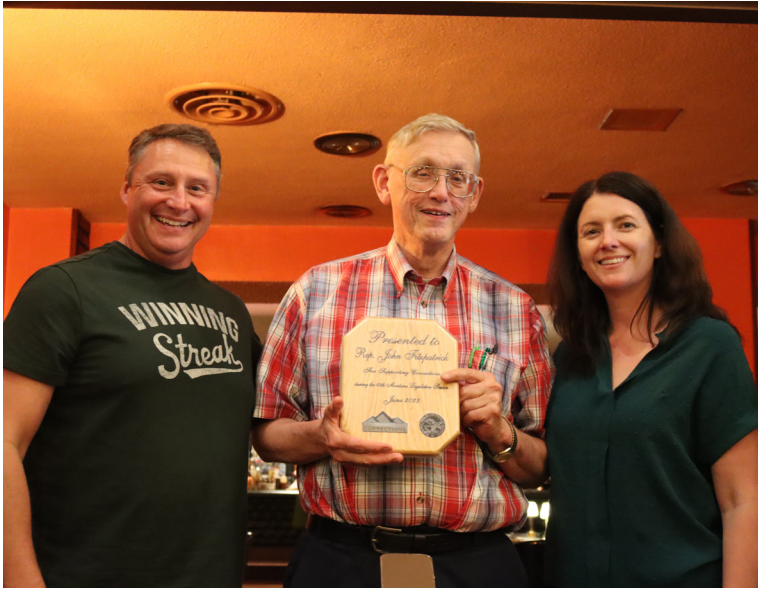
Organizers also provided opportunities for participants to socialize including a tour of the Orphan Girl Mine, a historic Butte trolley tour, and a Spooks and Spirits tour.

“This is the first time the department has brought this group of leaders together at the same place and time,” said Wolken. “We call and email each other regularly as we conduct day-to-day DOC business, but since we’re spread from one side of the state to the other, many had never met face-to-face. The retreat gave us the opportunity to make those important connections, along with expand our knowledge.”

“*The leadership retreat was a great experience. I’m a pretty solitary person and I do love that we can connect by TEAMS now, but I didn’t realize how much I miss interacting with people in person. I especially liked the breakouts with the groups of four. It actually spurred some great conversations. I only wished we had more time.*”

**~Jodi Stone, DOC budget manager**





## Orphan Girl Mine Tour Butte MT



# Correctional Professionals Week

Every May, departments of corrections throughout the U.S. celebrate National Correctional Professionals Week. President Ronald Reagan made that proclamation in 1984 to recognize the professionalism, dedication, and courage displayed by people who work in the corrections field. The Montana DOC recognizes its employees with bbqs, potlucks, billboards, and more. Thank you for everything you do!

