

NEWSRELEASE

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Corrections shuffles administrative programs

HELENA – The Montana Department of Corrections has shuffled several of its administrative programs as part of an effort to deal with changing needs of the agency and the offenders it serves.

In a move announced Friday by Director Bill Slaughter, the department created a new division to improve the coordination of health care services throughout the corrections system, upgrade management of information, and provide more efficient planning when new programs and facilities are necessary.

“We’ve always felt there was a need for more focus on health planning,” Slaughter said. “These changes reflect new priorities for the department that are driven by the individualized needs of inmates.”

The changes were made using existing authorized staffing levels, he said.

The new Health, Planning and Information Services Division will include three bureaus: health services, information and business technology, and planning management. It will be headed by Gary Hamel, who joined the department last month to head the Centralized Services Division.

That division, renamed the Administrative and Financial Services Division, will focus primarily on agency budgeting and fiscal responsibilities. Rhonda Schaffer, a 14-year veteran of the agency and chief of the department’s Fiscal Bureau for nearly four years, will be administrator.

Hamel said his move to the new division was a natural one for someone with his background, particularly his training in project management. “I look at this as a fresh challenge for me to help the department tackle health care, one of the most serious issues facing corrections throughout Montana and across the country.”

The department spends about \$2.4 million a year to obtain medical care for inmates outside the corrections system and that doesn’t count the costs of prescription drugs and operating prison infirmaries, he noted. Not only are health care costs rising rapidly for the department – just as they are for all Montanans – but the inmate population presents special challenges, he said.

Offenders are requiring more extensive health care because they are an aging population with more extensive health problems, largely due to drug abuse such as methamphetamine, Hamel said. Ten years ago, about 25 percent of inmates were older than 40; today, that number is almost 40 percent.

The new division will be involved in a collaborative effort between corrections and the Department of Health and Human Services to improve coordination of mental health services and programs administered by the two agencies.

“With the Corrections Department being Montana’s largest provider of mental health services, the addition of a behavioral health director offers us a chance to improve services to those offenders with mental disorders,” Slaughter said.

The financial services division will be responsible for all budget planning, oversight of collection of restitution and supervision fees from offenders, payroll, accounting services, development of grants, and management of more than 200 contracts.

“I’m looking forward to this new role of overseeing a two-year budget of \$267 million for an agency that takes seriously its obligations of ensuring wise use of that money to provide public safety and make a difference in the lives of thousands of offenders,” Schaffer said.

The changes involve more than 50 employees. Hamel and Schaffer each will be paid \$72,384 a year.

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