

Quarterly Update

Winter Edition 2026



Creating A Safer Montana Through Accountability, Rehabilitation & Empowerment

New Beginnings: Eric Strauss takes the helm at DOC



The team at the Montana Department of Corrections was glad to see a familiar face moving into the director's office in January – Eric Strauss.

Before Christmas, Governor Greg Gianforte announced his selection of Strauss to replace Brian Gootkin who departed following his nomination by President Trump to the post of U.S. Marshal for the District of Montana.

“Eric has been a strong leader who

will carry on Director Gootkin's progress at the Department of Corrections,” Gianforte said. “He's committed to overseeing the historic investments we've made into our correctional facilities and building the future of corrections in Montana.”

Strauss had been in the position of deputy director at DOC for about a year when the governor tapped him for the director's job. Prior to DOC, Strauss was an administrator for the employment standards division at the Montana Department of Labor and Industry. He also worked as the director of organizational excellence at St. Peter's Hospital before moving to DLI in 2016.

“I am deeply honored and humbled by Gov. Gianforte's trust in me to serve as the next Director of the Montana Department of Corrections,” Strauss said. “I want to thank Director Gootkin for his leadership and dedication to public safety and rehabilitation.”

According to Strauss, his immediate

areas of focus include:

- Ensuring construction on new units and infrastructure systems at Montana State Prison continues in an efficient manner.
- Identifying a site for a new women's prison to address Montana's expanding female prison population.
- Completing implementation of DOC's new offender management system, Compass.
- Emphasizing programming and strategies identified to support desistance among the department's offender population.

“I look forward to building on the department's strong foundation and working alongside our dedicated staff and community partners to ensure a safer, more effective corrections system for all Montanans,” he said.



Fond Farewell: Brian Gootkin embarks on new challenge



Following his nomination by President Trump to the post of U.S. Marshal for the District of Montana last fall, Brian Gootkin announced his departure from the Montana Department of Corrections after five years in the position of director.

In his farewell email to department staff, Gootkin wrote “Five years ago, I was the DOC’s biggest critic,” but that he quickly learned the DOC team “was dedicated, passionate, and loyal to our mission.”

Gootkin dedicated much of his time at the department

to ensuring department staff had the resources they need to be successful in their work.

Throughout his tenure, Gootkin compiled what he fondly called the department’s “Winning” list and shared that with the One DOC team. Here are a few highlights:

- \$701.5 million over two legislative sessions to fund construction of new infrastructure and repair projects
- Future of Corrections Fund - \$250 million to fund a new women’s prison and provide a strong foundation for the future of corrections
- Culture change – One DOC
- Recruitment and retention efforts – brought the correctional officer vacancy rate at Montana State Prison from 40% down to less than 5%, and increased correctional officer pay 45%
- First DOC-run prerelease – Flathead Valley Reentry Center in Kalispell
- Formation of the Citizen Ambassadors for Change

Thank you for your leadership and dedication, Director Gootkin. We wish you success in your next endeavor!



Building the future of corrections: Construction continues in Deer Lodge

In April 2025, the Montana Department of Corrections broke ground on construction at Montana State Prison. Less than a year later, progress is humming along at a steady pace.

On the low-side, walls are in place for three of the new housing units.

“We’re very excited to see the progress that’s happening at Montana State Prison,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “This is something that has been a long time coming, and we appreciate the support over the last two legislative sessions from the legislature and Governor Greg Gianforte. These new units will benefit public safety in Montana, and we can’t wait to see the work continue.”

During the 2023 legislature, the DOC was allocated \$211 million in HB 5 and HB 817 for infrastructure improvements at MSP. Some of these improvements included \$156 million for low-side housing replacement, \$18.8 million for Unit D renovations, and a new high-side program building for \$9 million. In the 2025 legislative session, the DOC was allocated an additional \$150 million for two more housing units at MSP.

MSP Warden Jim Salmonsén has worked at the facility for more than 25 years.

“It’s been amazing every day to come to work and see the progress of the building,” Salmonsén said. “This is an update that’s needed to come for a long time. It’s going to bring our facility into the future and make working at Montana State Prison safer for our employees.”

The existing low-side housing capacity at MSP is 803. With the completion of construction of the new units and renovations to the D unit, housing capacity will increase to 1,280. Construction is currently expected to be completed by January 2029.

The department is developing plans for water system enhancements outside the fence to support and complement the ongoing infrastructure expansion inside the fence.

Thanks to the use of modern correctional construction principles in the new buildings and the installation of up-to-date technology, correctional staff will be able to perform their jobs with greater efficiency.



DOC celebrates graduates of The Last Mile

Family and friends gathered in January at Montana State Prison to celebrate 10 students who graduated from The Last Mile program. The Last Mile (TLM) is the leading provider of technology training programs and transitional support for incarcerated people across the country. The program offers comprehensive technology training that prepares students for the workforce upon release from prison. This was the third cohort to graduate at MSP.



“I was up in Shelby for five years and I was in a really dark place, and I was praying for a way out,” graduate Chase Munson said. “I was not in good habits, and I was making poor choices. A buddy of mine came up and told me to apply for The Last Mile. It’s been the singular most important factor of my life since I’ve been incarcerated, choosing to apply for The Last Mile.”

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~TLM Graduate Chase Munson

MWP fostered neglected dogs after raid



Last fall, Montana Women’s Prison helped foster dogs that were confiscated by the Yellowstone County Sheriff’s Office as part of an animal cruelty case. Fifteen of the 42 dogs seized in the raid were brought to MWP



where inmates who participate in Prison Paws, a dog training and boarding program, helped care for them for approximately two months.



MSP water failure response: Thank you to our staff and partners

In October 2025, the Montana State Prison water system experienced a catastrophic failure, leaving inmates and facility staff without access to water. In the immediate hours and days that followed, Montana Department of Corrections staff members stepped up to the plate in one of the agency’s most trying times in recent memory. We appreciate everyone who mobilized at MSP to support staff members and inmates for more than 15 days. Because of you, we were able to get through this crisis without any major incidents inside the compound and got water restored. Thank you again for all that you do!



MCE staff and inmate work crews assist with firewood giveaway

Montana Correctional Enterprise inmate work crews assisted with Deer Lodge’s annual firewood giveaway in November 2025. MCE staff and inmate workers prepped for the event by splitting firewood provided by Sun Mountain Lumber. Community members who were unable to pick up firewood at the fairgrounds received firewood deliveries from inmate workers. Inmates also helped load firewood into the trucks of those who attended the event.

Thank you to everyone who helped make the event possible, including Sun Mountain Lumber for the firewood, Powell County Council on Aging for setting up the deliveries, Powell County Fairgrounds Management Board for the use of the fairgrounds, the City of Deer

Lodge staff and Powell County Road Crew for delivering the wood to the fairgrounds, and Jim and Debby Evans for loading community members’ trailers with their skid steer. We are proud to be a part of this amazing event each year!



STEP: Providing specialized treatment to low-level sex offenders

Representatives from the Montana Department of Corrections and Community, Counseling, and Correctional Services, Inc. (CCCS) gathered in October for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the opening of the new Specialized Treatment Enhanced Program (STEP).

The 68-bed facility, located in the Sanction, Treatment, Assessment, Revocation, and Transition (START) Center near Anaconda, provides specialized treatment to low-level sex offenders. The program serves offenders in community corrections facilities or programs and offenders transitioning out of secure facilities.

“STEP provides DOC additional capacity and valuable flexibility for placement of individuals with very specific treatment needs,” said DOC Rehabilitative and Enterprise Division Chief Scott Eychner. “This specialized programming takes an evidence-based approach to rehabilitation, helping prepare offenders to successfully return to their communities.”

STEP is DOC’s first community corrections facility to use the Integrated Correctional Programming Model (ICPM). The DOC first implemented the ICPM in 2024 at Montana State Prison and Crossroads Correctional Center as part of the shift to evidence-based programming following

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Flathead Valley Reentry Center accepting residents



The new Flathead Valley Reentry Center (FVRC) in Kalispell is accepting residents after its grand opening late last fall.

“The staff is fully trained and we’re ramping up with more residents every month,” said Scott Eychner, Rehabilitative and Enterprise Division Chief for the

Montana Department of Corrections. “This is the first DOC-run reentry facility, and we are excited about the opportunity that presents for individuals preparing to return to Montana communities.”

At capacity, the center will accommodate 90 male residents who work at area businesses and participate in programming at FVRC and through community resources. On Jan. 30, 2026, the population at the facility was 12.

“In the community, our residents are finding employment so they can contribute financially to their stay at FVRC, help their families, pay taxes, and meet other responsibilities,” Eychner said. “At the facility, they are receiving the structure and support they need to be ready for the next step.”

For more information about FVRC, call (406) 758-6208.



Probation and Parole officers recognized in ceremony

On Dec. 9, 19 officers were recognized during the first Montana Department of Correction’s Probation and Parole Awards Ceremony.

Awards covered four categories: Community Partner, Life Saving, Valor, and Chief’s Award.

“Our Probation and Parole officers work extremely hard in communities across Montana every day,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “Everyone who was recognized stepped up in a time of need to ensure public safety. We’re proud to have folks like this representing the DOC across the state.”

The following officers were recognized with the Life Saving Award, which recognizes individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary bravery, skill, or service in saving or attempting

to save a human life. Billings P&P officers Kayla Zidak, Jonathan Ford, Matthew Lockard, Adrianna Swick-Newell and Danielle Row administered lifesaving aid to an offender while doing a home check. The second award was presented to Great Falls P&P officers Rachel Kaeser and Tony Spencer who also administered lifesaving aid to an offender who was found unresponsive.

The Valor Award recognized an act of exceptional courage, bravery, or heroism that goes above and beyond the call of duty, often involving extreme personal danger and a risk to one’s own life to save

or protect others. Officers Andruw Sovereign, Abanoub Atwan, Nathan Betz, Nathan Hartnett, Landon Lamb, Rebecca Bracken, and Major Andrew Garmer were recognized for responding to an active shooter incident at the Helena courthouse in March 2025. Probation Officers Leslie Watts and Neava Hall received the Valor Award for their efforts in negotiating with an offender to turn himself in safely after calling in a bomb threat to the local Department of Health and Human Services office. Officers Darin Allen and Shawn Heidrick, who are members of the U.S. Marshals’ Fugitive Task Force, aided in the

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~Director Eric Strauss



DOC mental health team recognized at Governor’s Awards



Dr. Cory Sonneman and the Montana Department of Corrections’ mental health team care for 3,500 inmates, and this work was recognized in October by Governor Greg Gianforte with Governor’s Awards for Excellence in Performance.

“Mental health wellness is just as important as physical health, and our mental health staff dedicate countless hours to helping our inmates,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “Dr. Sonneman is an invaluable asset, and we’re lucky our inmates have access to him in moments of mental health crisis. I’m also proud of the work our team put into specifically addressing the issue of suicide in our secure facilities. It’s great for our people to be recognized by Governor Gianforte.”

Sonneman, the department’s only psychiatrist, has been with the DOC since 2022. While he’s based at Montana State Prison, Sonneman serves inmates across the state in DOC-run facilities. He specifically focuses on inmates transferred to the DOC from the Montana State Hospital (MSH) in cases where MSH is unable to provide the necessary level of security and care. Sonneman also works closely with the mental health team for all mental health care situations and crisis needs.

Over the past year, the DOC mental health team worked

specifically to address the issue of suicides inside secure facilities. This included working collaboratively, as a team, to ensure inmates always have access to care, and that documentation is occurring in a consistent manner to ensure an effective continuum of care. Thanks to this work, the DOC went over a year without a completed suicide in a Montana prison.

“I’d like to extend a big congratulations to Dr. Sonneman and the DOC’s mental health team on this well-deserved recognition,” said Cindy Hiner, DOC Health Services bureau chief. “This award is a powerful testament to your dedication, compassion, and commitment to excellence in caring for our population. Your work makes a difference in the lives of those you serve and reflects the highest standards of professionalism, teamwork, and service. Thank you for your tireless efforts. I am so very proud of each of you.”



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~Cindy Hiner, Health Services Bureau Chief



DOC establishes wellness team for staff

With the new year comes new goals, and Montana Department of Corrections staff got a jump start on their health and wellness with the help of the One DOC Wellness Team.

Established last fall, the DOC Wellness Team focuses on creating a positive, resilient culture by providing health and wellness information and resources tailored to the unique stressors of correctional work. These resources include educational webinars, a list of local gyms that provide discounts to DOC staff, a vetted list of mental health providers who specialize in seeing first responders, and more.

The team encourages staff to take a more proactive approach to their health and wellbeing by

participating in monthly challenges. The first challenge kicked off in January with a 30-Day Movement Challenge, where staff were encouraged to exercise for at least 30 minutes per day for 30 consecutive days.

DOC Wellness Manager Chris Lamb is also providing resiliency training that focuses on the stressors of correctional work, how to identify the signs of fatigue in yourself and others, and how to combat that fatigue with positive lifestyle choices.

Lamb has been with the department since 2002 and is excited to be able to offer these resources to staff. “I’ve seen firsthand the struggles that can come from the demands

of working in corrections,” he says. “The Wellness Team provides the opportunity to give back to those who serve their communities and to empower staff to take control of their own wellbeing.”



Pheasants to take flight at Pine Hills Correctional Facility

The Montana Department of Corrections is expanding its pheasant-rearing program at Montana State Prison to Pine Hills Correctional Facility (PHCF) this year.

The pheasant program, which was approved by the 2021 Montana Legislature, is a partnership between the DOC and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP). Inmate workers hatch the eggs at MSP, raise the pheasants, and then FWP releases them on state-owned land. The purpose of the program is hunter recruitment, particularly youth hunters.

“This is going to be a wonderful opportunity to expand this program to the east side of the state to benefit Montanans,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “Instead of relying on pheasants from Deer Lodge, FWP will now be able to get pheasants closer to home. It’s also going to offer a great opportunity for inmates to work in this program.”

PHCF staff have constructed the pheasant pens and will follow a strict biosecurity plan when the birds are in place. The pheasants will be cared for by female inmates from Montana Women’s Prison who will be living at Pine Hills.

“The work Captain Jeff Lee and his team put into setting up the pheasant pens and preparing for the pheasants will finally pay off this year,” said PHCF Warden Steve Ray. “The staff and residents are excited to get birds and have the program up and running.”

At MSP, 12 inmate workers care for the pheasants at the height of the season. The program is estimated to hatch 50,000 birds this year thanks to the addition of the flight pens at Pine Hills. Over the past three years, the program has hatched 89,000 pheasants.



HEART Waiver: Providing inmates with resources to succeed

Thanks to the implementation of the Healing and Ending Addiction through Recovery and Treatment (HEART) Waiver program last year, the Montana Department of Corrections team begins preparing inmates to care for their health and wellness after release as soon as they enter DOC secure facilities.

“Before, we had to wait until about six months before an individual’s release to screen them for Medicaid,” said DOC’s Health Services Bureau Chief Cindy Hiner. “Now, we can initiate enrollment discussions during their first intake meeting, getting that support in place right from the start.”

Federal law requires coverage to be suspended during incarceration, but the waiver ensures it is active for the critical pre-release window.

According to studies, inmates are nearly 13 times more likely to die during their first two weeks of freedom than the general population, making it imperative to have support systems in place on the outside. Causes of death often

include drug overdoses, suicide, homicide, and cardiovascular disease.

Prior to the establishment of the HEART Waiver, the DOC worked to connect inmates with mental health and health care resources in the community before their release. In addition, the department provided individuals leaving prison with enough of their prescription medication to last for 30 days, including prescriptions used for Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT).

The HEART waiver program enhances that process by allowing opportunities for inmate case consultation with community providers 30 days before leaving prison. Also, the waiver allows the DOC to bill Medicaid for prescription medications beginning 30 days before release. Previously, those bills were paid from the DOC’s budget.

“Connecting incarcerated individuals with community providers before they are discharged provides them a seamless transition for medical,

mental health, and substance abuse care,” Hiner said. “This collaborative “in-reach” model fosters trust, stabilizes individuals during re-entry, and potentially lowers long-term health care costs.”



Inmates use privacy booths to consult with community medical and mental health providers.

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the passage of 2017’s Montana Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

Developed by Correctional Service of Canada, the ICPM provides a holistic approach to treatment and programming, addressing sexual offending, substance abuse problems, criminal thinking, anger

management, and more in one program. It is a three-part program comprised of four streams: Multi-Target, Indigenous, Sex Offender, and Indigenous Sex Offender. Each stream has a Moderate and High track, and placement is determined based on risk assessments.

The DOC has currently implemented the Multi-Target and Sex Offender streams. Residents of STEP focus on the Sex Offender stream.



DOC recruitment video recognized at national level

In December 2025, the Montana Department of Corrections was recognized by Corrections1, an online corrections news outlet, as a finalist in its top corrections recruitment video of the year contest.

The video, produced by Eric Visocan, owner of Burnt Image, highlights the wide range of careers within the DOC – correctional officers, Probation and Parole, nursing, investigations, teaching, operations, and more – and the shared sense of purpose that ties them together. The video featured members of the One DOC team from throughout the state. Other contest nominees included the Delaware Department of Corrections, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the New York City Department of Correction, and the Orange County Corrections Department, Florida.

While the department wasn't voted the best recruitment video of 2025 by Corrections1 readers – the Orange County Corrections Department took that honor - we're proud to have been recognized at the national level.

Thank you to Burnt Image for creating our top-notch representation of the challenging and rewarding work we do and to everyone who voted for Montana DOC's video!



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search for a man suspected of shooting four people at a bar in Anaconda.

Additionally, the Probation and Parole Bureau recognized Courtney Saska of Hosanna Assisted Living with the Community Advocate Award.

Libby P&P Officer Steve Watson was honored with the Chief's Award. Watson has been employed with the DOC since 2001.

“I was surprised when I learned that I would be receiving the award, but I felt appreciated by the community I work in,” said Watson. “I also realized that I had a lot of support from colleagues in the Kalispell Region and in the Libby Office. It was a cool experience to receive the award at the ceremony in Helena. My wife and two boys were able to come to the ceremony so it will be a great family memory as well.”

