



Quarterly Update | Spring Edition 2025

Creating a safer Montana through accountability, rehabilitation and empowerment

Building the future of corrections

DOC breaks ground on MSP low-side housing with Governor Gianforte



(Left to right): Rep. John Fitzpatrick, Gov. Greg Gianforte, Director Brian Gootkin, and MSP Warden Jim Salmonsens participated in a groundbreaking ceremony at Montana State Prison on April 29.

Governor Greg Gianforte joined Montana Department of Corrections Director Brian Gootkin and other dignitaries in April for the ceremonial groundbreaking for three new units on the low security side of Montana State Prison.

“After decades of previous administrations applying Band-Aids and kicking the can down the road, we knew it was long overdue to invest in needed repairs at our state prison,” Gov. Gianforte said.

Building, Page 2



Building continued ...



Governor Greg Gianforte and DOC Director Brian Gootkin break ground in a ceremony to kick off the construction at Montana State Prison on the new low-side housing units.

“Standing alongside our partners, today we break ground on our investments from last legislative session and start a historic \$156 million project for more housing units at the prison.”

Also participating in the event were the First Lady, Rep. John Fitzpatrick, who sponsored key legislation related to the construction; Tony Ewalt, president of Sletten Construction; and Ryan White, senior associate with DLR Group.

Almost simultaneously with the groundbreaking, lawmakers in the 2025 Montana Legislative Session signed off on

House Bill 5, also sponsored by Rep. Fitzpatrick. The bill allocates \$150 million for the addition of two units to the three units under construction and other improvements to the project.

“We are extremely grateful for these generational investments in the DOC by Governor Gianforte and Montana legislators to ensure public safety, along with that of our staff members and the inmates under our care,” said Director Gootkin.

“We are building the future of corrections in Montana and are dedicated to being good stewards of taxpayer dollars dedicated to these critical projects.”

2025 Montana Legislative Session

House Bill 5

Delivered much-needed funding to improve and expand DOC infrastructure throughout Montana.

- MSP Low Side Housing Expansion - \$150 million
- MSP Site Infrastructure Upgrades - \$21 million
- MSP Comprehensive Mechanical System Replacement - \$4.75 million
- MSP/MCE Roof Replacements - \$1.35 million
- PHCF Utility Tunnel and Heating System Repairs - \$1.2 million
- MSP Gravel Pit Equipment Generator Replacement - \$180,000
- MSP MCE Restroom Repairs - \$200,000
- MSP Construction Education Program Building/Old Territorial Prison Repair - \$4.2 million

Session, page 7



DOC launches youth outreach program with inmates

As Travis Sodenberg and Reid Dannell walk into East Helena High School, the chains that keep the two Montana State Prison inmates restrained jingle together. Their orange jumpsuits stand out in stark contrast as the pair take their seats in the music room in front of a small group of students.

The inmates are participants in the Montana Department of Corrections' newest outreach program – Choices in the 406.

According to Montana State Prison Correctional Officer Ladonna Bewley, the premise of the program isn't to "scare students straight." Instead, the purpose is to demonstrate how the choices the inmates made as youths impacted their lives. Bewley conceived and coordinates the program.

The 12-year employee of the DOC said she has heard many inmates' personal stories in that time and realized they could be used for a positive purpose. Inmates participating in the Choices in the 406 program are



Inmates Travis Sodenberg and Reid Dannell joined MSP Officer Ladonna Bewley at East Helena High School for a Choices in the 406 event.

rigorously screened and must be low-security offenders who have not committed crimes against children.

"I'm very proud of the inmates who are a part of this program," Bewley said. "They have huge hearts for these kids, and they really do care about them. Just seeing the impact they have has been amazing."

During the visit to the East Helena school, the inmates spoke about their lives growing up and what they wish they had done differently. Also, they

gave the students a glimpse of what it's like to be incarcerated and what they miss about life outside the fence. Their key message is to not be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

"I care about these kids because I've been through it," Sodenberg said. "I wish that somebody would have told me this when I was younger. I just decided to make a change in my life and the best way I could was through a program like this."



Flathead prerelease center project gets go-ahead

The Montana Department of Corrections is moving full steam ahead with efforts to open a prerelease center in the Flathead, with plans for the new facility to begin accepting residents in October 2025.

“This prerelease center will be an important resource for this region of Montana,” said DOC Director Brian Gootkin. “Previously, this option wasn’t available to inmates returning to the northwest part of the state. Now, they will be able to reunite with their families, find jobs, and connect with services that will help them successfully reintegrate into their community.”

About 13% of residents at prerelease facilities throughout Montana were sentenced from the Kalispell area.

The 2023 Montana Legislature allocated \$7.1 million for the establishment of a 90-bed prerelease center in the Flathead. The DOC identified the Greenwood



Village Inn & Suites in Evergreen as an appropriate location for such a facility. In April, the department received the necessary approvals from the county to move forward.

The DOC immediately began advertising for a director for the facility and will start filling positions ranging from case managers to security officers.

“This will be the first DOC-run prerelease in the state, and we look forward to demonstrating what a good neighbor we can be,” Gootkin said.

Over the next few months, the department will be conducting renovations to ramp up for the arrival of residents including increasing the level of security,

preparing office and living space, configuring group programming areas, and more.

These efforts will expand into training new staff members as the facility gets closer to opening its doors.

Gootkin added that the DOC will have Probation and Parole officers, including a K-9 and handler, stationed at the prerelease to assist with security.

For more information about the prerelease center, contact Megan Coy at mcoy@mt.gov or (406) 444-1538.



New Faces and Places: DOC hires new leadership positions

Over the past six months, the Department of Corrections has hired several key positions in the agency.

✓ Director Gootkin confirmed for second term

In April, Brian Gootkin was confirmed for a second term by the Montana Legislature as the director of the Department of Corrections.

“I’m excited to build on the progress we’ve made the past four years at the DOC,” Gootkin said. “We’ve put in a lot of work with recruitment of new employees, improving our culture, and refining our values. We’re building the future of corrections in Montana and I’m excited about what comes next.”



Public Safety Chief John Schaffer smiles for a photo with Attorney General Austin Knudsen after his confirmation.

had most recently been working as the DOC’s Quality Assurance specialist for the Probation and Parole Bureau.

“We’re excited to have John transition into this new leadership role where we know he’ll succeed,” Director Brian Gootkin said. “He is a dynamic leader with a passion for the work the department does.”

the administrator for the Employment Standards Division for almost nine years.

“Eric has the experience and leadership that fit perfectly within our culture,” Gootkin said. “He will be instrumental in the efforts of the DOC as we continue to make generational changes.”

✓ New Public Safety chief selected

In March, John Schaffer took the helm as the department’s new Public Safety chief. Schaffer retired as a captain from the Great Falls Police Department and

✓ DOC selected Eric Strauss for deputy director position

Eric Strauss joined the Department of Corrections as its new deputy director in December. Strauss came to the department from the Montana Department of Labor and Industry where he served as

Strauss said: “I am beyond excited about joining the team at the DOC and am looking forward to joining him and the whole team in fulfilling those goals in support of all Montanans.”

Hires, page 11



CMPASS

Update: DOC team participates in fit gap and user story sessions

More than 120 members of the DOC team have participated in sessions geared to ensure the functionality of the department's new offender management system to help staff members work more efficiently and effectively.

"This process involves participants from all areas and disciplines within the department," said John Daugherty, chief executive officer for the DOC's Central Services division. "By working closely with our contractor, Mi-Case, at every stage, the department should end up with a final product that will really transform the way we perform our everyday tasks."

Fit gap sessions for the system, Compass, began in January. Mi-Case representatives hosted a series of workshops with DOC subject matter experts to learn

about their work processes in areas ranging from offender supervision in the community, to visitation in secure facilities. Then, the work groups determined whether there were any gaps between Mi-Case's existing functionality and the needs of the DOC.

Using the information collected at those workshops and through user stories, Mi-Case and the subject matter experts are reviewing modules and screens to configure them to correspond with the department's workflow and functionality.

"We have dedicated teams and subject matter experts making significant headway on this project," Daugherty said. "Something we don't want to lose sight of are DOC employees who are not directly involved in the work."

"This project won't be successful if we don't have an engaged and receptive workforce to fully use this resource."

For that reason, the DOC recently formed an Organizational Change Management team, led by Eric Strauss, to help keep staff members informed and excited about the Compass project. The OCM team will also prepare the DOC for changes that will occur such as the use of signature pads and the new offender portal. The team will use a variety of methods to accomplish that including the Compass website, in-person training, and much more.

The 2023 Montana Legislature allocated \$17.7 million to the DOC to purchase a new offender management system. Full implementation of the new system is scheduled to occur by January 2027.





Hip, Hop and Hope comes to MSP

Michael Bloom, left, and his ministry group “Hip, Hop and Hope” visited MSP in March for a service. The group uses hip hop music to connect with groups to which it presents.

Legislature continued

House Bill 2

- Four new FTE to support a K-9 program in Probation and Parole - \$447,800
- Two new FTE in Victims’ Services Bureau
- Case management for youth releasing from DOC system - \$77,500
- Investment in employee training - \$600,000
- Security equipment and licensing - \$2.45 million
- Upgrade and replacement of vehicles
- Funding for continuation of parenting programs (CAMPP MT)
- Automated pharmacy device, upgrades to medical equipment

House Bill 3

- Door replacement in RHU at MSP - \$8.9 million

House Bill 10

- Long-range Technology Bill
- Body Cams/Tasers - \$1.6 million
- MCE/Warehouse/Maintenance Enterprise Operations System - \$3.1 million



House Bill 13

- State employee pay raise bill
- State employee pay raises - \$1 or 2.5% increase (whichever is larger) on July 1, 2025 and July 1, 2026

House Bill 833

Created the Future of Corrections Fund

- Construction, renovation, purchase of correctional facilities - \$246 million
- Evaluation of options for correctional population management – \$4 million
- Related operations, maintenance - \$3.5 million



Probation and Parole launches new field training program



The first group of FTO graduates was celebrated in Helena in January.

The Montana Department of Corrections Probation and Parole Bureau launched a new Field Training Evaluation Program (FTEP) last fall to continue supporting staff development.

The FTEP trains new Probation and Parole officers so that each employee is prepared to function as a solo officer at the conclusion of their training. In the FTEP, new trainees are led by current officers who are trained as Field Training Officers (FTOs).

“We are excited to bring this program to our Probation and Parole Bureau to help continue training top-notch officers,” DOC Director Brian Gootkin said.

“This is a great opportunity for our current officers to step into a leadership role and share their experiences with new officers.”

The Field Training Evaluation Program (FTEP) is 15 weeks for new officers. The training, conducted by FTOs, consists of intense, on-the-job training with daily performance evaluations. FTOs

conduct their regular assigned duties along with their FTO responsibilities.

In order to be an FTO, officers must apply for the program. Once accepted, they must complete a department-approved 40-hour training course within the first six months. All FTOs receive an FTO pin to wear on their uniform.

Probation and Parole Bureau Chief Sean Goeddel commended the officers who stepped up in the first class last fall.

“Your dedication and unwavering commitment to training the next generation of Probation and Parole officers cannot be overstated.”

-P&P Bureau Chief Sean Goeddel

“You are providing them with the essential skills and knowledge to navigate the challenges of this profession. Your mentorship goes beyond training as it instills confidence, fosters resilience, and builds a foundation to guide your trainees throughout their careers,” Goeddel said.

FTO, page 11



Sew fantastic: Inmates gain skills in textile services



MWP inmate worker Debra Hay works on a sewing project for the Junior League of Billings conference in March.

When you enter the Montana Correctional Enterprises building at the Montana Women's Prison, you're greeted by the hum of sewing and industrial embroidery machines. The inmate workers are busy with projects for state agencies and other groups, from embroidered baseball caps to screen-printed t-shirts.

In this space, women learn technical and soft skills that will aid them when they return to Montana communities.

One of the group's latest projects is a screen-printed vinyl bag for the Junior League of Billings annual conference.

"It is fun to work with different departments, especially in this project," inmate worker Lindsay Haugen said. "I'm taking what I've done and am giving it to someone else. When I'm done, it's just a clear piece of plastic, but when sewing is done with it, it's a bag. It's professional-looking and looks like a bag you'd get at a store. It's fun seeing that product come together."



the design for the project. Once they developed a design and acceptable price point, the women went to work. It took several departments working together, from the workers in screen-printing putting the logo on the bag to the women who sewed the product together.

It was a new challenge for the inmate workers outside of their typical t-shirt or embroidery project.

"It's good to see them being creative, it's not just another t-shirt or hoodie or jacket that they're embroidering," Inmate Production Shop Supervisor Laura Hopkins said. "It's something that they can actually put their heads together and develop the best process."

Montana Correctional Enterprises offers inmates at Montana State Prison and the Montana Women's Prison a variety of job opportunities and training programs. Inmates can

Sew, page 11



Pine Hills resumes use as a juvenile-only facility; juvenile females returned from Idaho



To meet the constantly evolving needs of its juvenile population, the Montana Department of Corrections has restored Pine Hills Correctional Facility to its former status as a juvenile facility.

As part of that transition, the department moved its juvenile female population to Pine Hills from the Idaho facility where that population has been housed for about nine years. The juvenile females range in age from 10 to 18 years old.

“Our staff is excited for the opportunity and challenge,” said Warden Steve Ray.

“We have great educational, vocational, correctional and treatment staff along with programming that will really meet the needs of the young ladies and give them a chance at future success.”

Recently, Pine Hills has been used to hold juvenile and adult males. The department moved the adults to other facilities throughout the state.

“The DOC has seen significant changes in its juvenile population over the past few years,” said DOC Director Brian Gootkin.

“Our juvenile offenders are more violent than ever. Approximately 42% of our population are affiliated with two gangs. This is incredibly challenging for our workforce because the offenders must be separated, creating another challenge with the offenders that are not gang members.”

The space made available by moving the adult population at Pine Hills will allow for more opportunity to meet those separation needs. Renovations made to Pine Hills to accommodate adult and juvenile populations several years ago allow sight and sound separation between the juvenile male and female populations.



HIRES continued ...



Weston takes the helm at Montana Women's Prison

Last fall, Katie Weston was hired as warden at the Montana Department of Corrections' Montana Women's Prison in Billings.

"Katie comes to the post with 12 years of experience in the DOC's Probation and Parole Bureau, much of that in supervisory roles," Gootkin said. "Katie brings exactly the level of leadership and enthusiasm we need to be effective in this important position."

As captain for the DOC's Billings Probation and Parole region, she oversaw about 60 employees disbursed across 13 counties. Prior to that, she served as a probation officer and as a sergeant. In addition, she has participated in numerous task forces and committees.

"I am thrilled to take on this new opportunity and look forward to continuing my career with the DOC," Weston said.

FTO continued ...

As of April, there were 18 certified FTOs.

Billings Probation and Parole Officer Bre Lewis was one of the DOC's current officers who wanted to participate in the program.

"I wanted to become an FTO because I have a passion for helping others succeed," she said.

"These officers are the new generation, and we need to ensure that they have all the tools they need to be successful. This experience has given me the opportunity to watch new officers grow and to know I am part of them succeeding is rewarding."

Sew continued...

work in textiles, on the ranch, on motor vehicles, or in a dog training program. They gain technical skills in their jobs, but they also sharpen their interpersonal skills, such as communication and teamwork.

Deb Hay, a worker in the sewing department, helped design the Junior League bag.

"It's like magic to me when it all comes together perfectly," Hay said. "It's exciting. Even when there's obstacles that have to be overcome. Just being able to come through and find those solutions is exciting."

