

Quarterly Update

Summer Edition 2026



Creating A Safer Montana Through Accountability, Rehabilitation & Empowerment

Congrats, grads: Probation and Parole graduates 36th class



In August, the Montana Department of Corrections graduated 24 officers from the Probation and Parole Academy at the Montana Law Enforcement Academy in Helena.

The officers came from offices across the state, from Polson to Sidney.

“P&P officers serve at a critical intersection between community safety and offender rehabilitation,” Director Eric Strauss said. “They act as day to day representatives of our department within neighborhoods throughout the state, supporting individuals as they reintegrate into their communities while also ensuring those

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DOC Family and Friends onboarding service: A helpful resource when a loved one goes to prison

JOIN OUR
FAMILY & FRIENDS —
ONBOARDING PROGRAM

Stay informed.
Stay connected.
Support the journey.



“We know that maintaining strong connections on the outside benefits them [offenders] while they are incarcerated and when they return to Montana communities. The purpose of the onboarding service is to support those relationships by proactively delivering instructions and helpful information to family and friends...”

~ Director Eric Strauss

Having an incarcerated loved one isn't easy for the family and friends left at home. It's even more difficult when it's the first time a loved one has been placed in Montana's prison system.

The Montana Department of Corrections wants to help ease that transition by connecting with family and friends early in the process to answer their frequently asked questions before they ask them.

In August, the DOC launched its family and friends onboarding service, an email service that delivers information to subscribers' inboxes about what to expect when a loved one enters prison. Many of the emails include videos featuring DOC staff sharing useful information about their areas of expertise, in addition to step-by-step instructions to complete important tasks, like applying for visitation.

“The offenders who enter our facilities are spouses, parents, grandparents, sons and daughters,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “We know that maintaining strong connections on the outside benefits them while they are incarcerated and when they return to Montana communities. The purpose of the onboarding service is to support those relationships by proactively delivering instructions and helpful information to family and friends to answer questions and hopefully alleviate some of their concerns.”

Topics include:

- Visitation applications
- Sending money
- Communications Part 1 – get set up with Getting Out and ICSolutions
- Communications Part 2 – mail
- What happens when your loved one arrives in prison – what's next?
- Inmate movement, transfers
- Medical and mental health services
- Programming, work, and education
- Ways we can work together

The DOC is advertising the service on its social media pages, website (cor.mt.gov), and via informational posters delivered to sheriffs and county attorneys in Montana.

To subscribe, visit cor.mt.gov or use the QR code pictured with this article.

SIGN UP TODAY



**Connection matters.
Support matters.
Being there matters.**



MCE receives praise for church furniture project

The Montana Correctional Enterprises' (MCE) programs take on a variety of projects ranging from building new furniture pieces to restoration work. This summer, MCE's inmate workers completed a special furniture project for the St. Mary's Catholic Church in Stevensville, earning them high praise from the community.

In July, MCE delivered 38 pews, two ADA benches, two front guards, a lectern, a podium, and two altars, all built from scratch at Montana State Prison. The inmate workers designed and built each item. It took about eight months to complete the project from concept to drop-off in Stevensville.

"It was amazing to see this project's progress throughout the shop, not only seeing the workers build something new, but watching the excitement and pride that built within them," said MCE Industries Director Tammy Finley. "The sheer size of this order made it an intimidating project for everyone. These guys came together, seasoned workers mentoring newer workers, everyone gaining new skills and working together as a team, they picked up momentum and embraced the challenge."

This was a unique project that required collaboration across different MCE areas. The pieces were first designed by inmate workers using the Computer-Aided Design (CAD) program. Once approved by the church, they moved into the production process. Inmates in the furniture shop assembled and stained all the pieces before the pews were sent to the upholstery area.

Doug Reinert was one of the inmate workers who helped design the church pews.

"I'm glad that people like our work," Reinert said. "It feels great to have stuff that we've designed, built and worked hard on to go out into the street and for people to like it. We've got excellent furniture here, and people don't know that this place exists. To design and create something this beautiful that goes into a church, a place of worship, that means a lot."



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~ Inmate Worker Doug Reinert



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DOC announces intention to expand capacity at existing locations

The Montana Department of Corrections plans to repurpose its facilities in Miles City and Boulder to increase prison capacity to manage the needs of its expanding adult female population, DOC Director Eric Strauss announced in July.

Following a thorough evaluation of Montana's secure correctional system, the DOC will move female inmates housed at Riverside in Boulder to Pine Hills Correctional Facility; relocate male and female juveniles at Pine Hills to Riverside; and maintain the Montana Women's Prison's current use as a secure facility for adult females.

"Our goal is to have about 500 prison beds for adult females across the state," said DOC Director Eric Strauss. "This strategy allows us to leverage our existing infrastructure more effectively to achieve that while emphasizing the department's ongoing commitment to our employees and the communities where these facilities are located."

Governor Gianforte and the 2025 Montana Legislature positioned the DOC to address prison overcrowding through HB 833 and the creation of The Future of Corrections Fund. The bill provided \$253.5 million for the DOC to evaluate options to manage its population and put that plan into action.

While Pine Hills – a 144-bed facility – has historically been used for juvenile male offenders, that population has declined from about 100, 12 years ago, to about 30 today. Less than 10 juvenile females are also housed there. On the other hand, MWP's population has been holding steady at its capacity of 240, with another 50 female inmates at Riverside. The number of female inmates in county jails awaiting transport to MWP hovers at around 60.

"The landscape of corrections is constantly evolving," Strauss said. "We need to be nimble, and the historic investment by Governor Gianforte and the Montana

Legislature in the department is allowing us to do that. We have a large-scale construction project underway at Montana State Prison to address capacity concerns among our adult male population. The changes we are planning will allow us to do the same with our female inmates."

The department will work closely with the state's Architecture and Engineering Division and the Governor's Office of Budget and Program Planning to make necessary renovations related to the housing and security needs of their new residents. In addition, facility staff will receive population-specific training and some positions will be restructured.

"Our employees at these facilities are extremely talented and knowledgeable in the management of correctional environments," Strauss said. "As a department we work together closely to adapt to change and strive toward positive outcomes for the people in our care."



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Building the future of corrections: DOC strategy for FY27

Bolstering the foundation for an effective, dedicated Montana Department of Corrections for years to come is the focus of the agency's strategic efforts in Fiscal Year 2027. The [DOC's annual plan](#) directs that work into three areas characterized by key measurements.

"Montana's correctional landscape comes with its challenges, and Governor Greg Gianforte and Montana lawmakers have provided us with the financial means to address many of those over the last two legislative sessions," said DOC Director Eric Strauss. "It's our duty to make sure we apply those resources to their full potential by developing a solid departmental structure and environment that promotes continuous improvement in the services we provide."

Strengthening workforce retention and organizational excellence

It makes sense that a solid, cohesive workforce is the backbone of an effective government agency. Following a correctional officer staffing crisis at Montana State Prison in 2022, the DOC is concentrating efforts on building and retaining a resilient, engaged, high-performing workforce. To achieve that, the department seeks to:

- Improve employee retention by 10%
- Maintain correctional officer vacancy rates below 15%

- Expand leadership and supervisory training programs.
- Complete and execute recommendations from workforce and security assessments
- Increase employee participation in wellness programs to 35%



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Improve program effectiveness and eligibility process to support offender success

Ensuring inmates leave prison with the skills to never return benefits all Montanans. To effectively deliver those skills, the DOC is working to:

- Decrease the number of sex offenders waiting for treatment by 25%
- Achieve a HiSet testing pass rate of 75%
- Improve behavior of inmates who are still incarcerated one year after

completing behavior management programming by 60%

- Increase the number of referrals to the Department of Labor and Industry's Office of Reentry Services by 50%
- Establish a method to track recidivism rates among individuals who participate in prerelease programs

Optimize facility use and plan for the future of corrections

As conscientious stewards of Montana tax dollars invested in the DOC, the department is committed to maximizing the use of correctional resources by strategically managing facilities and community correction capacity; reducing jail holds; and planning for the future of corrections in Montana. To accomplish that, the department plans to:

- Reduce the average wait time for secure bed placements to less than 30 days
- Ensure 95% of total community corrections bed space is occupied
- Reduce the average amount of time required to screen for offender placements by improving and streamlining workflow processes
- Create a long-term plan to address deferred maintenance, technology, and infrastructure needs driven by increase in capacity



Summer MSP construction update: Cell installation continues, work on water infrastructure

Construction crews at Montana State Prison are making the most of Big Sky Country's warm summer weather as they work on the prison's water infrastructure and continue cell installation.

In August, crews began work on the water transmission line in the new housing units. Upgrades will be made to raise the capacity of existing water infrastructure by increasing the water main line sizes where required and improving connections to existing water infrastructure.

"It's been exciting to watch the new construction at Montana State Prison take shape," said Director Eric Strauss. "Seeing the buildings rise from the ground is a powerful reminder of how much this project will transform our work. As the new campus moves toward completion, we're not only building new facilities, we're reimagining how we deliver services, support staff, and enhance safety. This is an important and energizing moment for the department, and I look forward to the opportunities this new campus will bring."

During the 2023 Montana 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 to build low-side housing, \$18.8 million for Unit D renovations, and \$9 million for a new high-side programs building. In the 2025 session, the DOC was allocated an additional \$150 million for two more housing units at MSP.

The construction project is adding five new housing units. Construction is expected to be completed by January 2029.

Inside the units, work continues. In August, cells were installed in F unit, and the mezzanine deck was started in E unit. The prefabricated cells include two beds, a sink, and a toilet. There are individual stalls for showers and an ADA-accessible stall as well.



DOC work group pilots self-help initiative at facilities

Over the last year, the Montana Department of Corrections' Citizen Ambassadors for Change (CAC) group has been working to inspire DOC inmates to support their own development and that of others.

The group – comprised of formerly incarcerated individuals who have achieved success in the community – worked with DOC staff to select the evidence-based Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) as one of the main programs to support that effort.

The WRAP program guides participants through the process of identifying and understanding their personal wellness resources and challenges. Then they learn how to develop an individualized plan to maintain well-being, manage stressors, identify warning signs of a crisis, and apply those skills to daily life.

So far, 367 men and 69 women have been trained in WRAP I among Crossroads Correctional Center, Montana State Prison, Montana Women's Prison, and Riverside.

"One of the reasons WRAP is so successful is because it is voluntary," said the DOC's CAC Facilitator Renee Seiller-McDaniel. "People sign up for it because they are ready to change, not because they have to satisfy a requirement. When a person is ready and embracing change, anything can happen. Self-image improves, relationships with family members improve, and the possibility of having a better life becomes a reality. It is so rewarding to watch people gain confidence in themselves and strive to live life over just existing."

Once inmates are trained in the WRAP system, they can become facilitators themselves and continue

spreading the lessons of WRAP within prison. So far, 12 inmate facilitators have been certified at MSP.

The CAC has received the following feedback directly from inmates:

- "There is a lot of fear when you get sent to prison. WRAP helps me focus on being healthy and making better decisions. It is definitely needed in here."
- "As a WRAP facilitator, I am constantly reminded of the good people have in them, regardless of the fact they are in prison."
- "When I saw my daughter following in my path, I decided to do different. WRAP helped me do that."



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~ CAC Facilitator Renee Seiller-McDaniel



Riverside hosts first Family Day with female inmates



There were cheers and tears of joy as families of inmates gathered at the Riverside facility in June for the first Family Day visit at that facility.

“Watching families come together to talk, laugh, play games, share meals, and reconnect created an atmosphere filled with hope and genuine joy,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “One of the most meaningful moments was seeing children spend time with their mothers, reminding us how important those relationships are for healing, stability, and growth on both sides. I am proud of the Riverside team for organizing and supporting such an important gathering, and for their continued dedication to creating opportunities that bring families closer together.”

Sixty-eight visitors attended the Family Day festivities. If inmates did not have visitors, they ran activities for



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communities remain safe. Their work requires balancing accountability with opportunity. We commend our newest officers for stepping into this vital role.”

During their 258 hours of training, officers sharpened their skills through a variety of hands-on training, educational presentations, and classwork. The classes included time on the shooting range, learning about crisis intervention training, and DOC policies and procedures.

Hunter Meinzen, an officer from Missoula, was one of the class graduates.

“The connections I made with other probation and parole officers around the state will definitely benefit me in my career with the DOC,” Meinzen said. “It was amazing to see how well everyone bonded together and supported each other through long days, and that’s something that will go a long way in this career path. Building those connections will make us ‘One DOC.’”

During the graduation ceremony, the following officers were recognized with awards based on class votes or

their testing scores:

- Hunter Meinzen (Missoula), Defensive Tactics;
- J.J. King (Missoula), Inspirational and Vigilance Award;
- Beau Reynolds (Kalispell), Class Representative Award;
- Daniel Parry (Billings), Firearms Award;
- Hayden Smerker (Helena), Scott Meyer Academic Award.

DOC Public Safety Training Coordinator Alexandra Holmes led the probation and parole academy.

“Watching students grow, learn, build confidence, and overcome challenges is one of the greatest rewards of what I do,” Holmes said. “One of my favorite moments is during Fight for Life, when you can see everything start to come together—the techniques click, confidence takes over, and students realize just how capable they are. Those moments are a big part of why I am so passionate about this job. I am excited to watch this class continue to grow and succeed throughout their time with the DOC.”

Church, Page 3

It turns out the Saint Mary’s Catholic Church project was the first of several of its kind for MCE. After a social media post on the DOC’s Facebook page raked up over 7,000 likes and more than 600 comments, other churches reached out to MCE. The MCE Industries division is currently working with three other church clients.

Inmate worker Clem Williams said this project brought the workers together.

“Some people are coming to meet God for the first time, and they’re going to be kneeling on these, so for me I couldn’t have done this without God’s help or these other guys helping me,” he said. “I want them to look at something I took a lot of pride in. A lot of guys had a real spiritual experience about it. That’s just what was shared amongst everybody. We had a whole bunch of people that are different religions work on it – Jehovah’s

Witness, a Muslim – and everybody said that they felt the same way about it, like it was a spiritual type thing.”



Celebrating Connie Girard: 50 years of public service with the DOC



Congratulations to Connie Girard for more than 50 years of service to the citizens of Montana at the Department of Corrections! DOC leadership and her co-workers at Montana State Prison took a moment to honor Connie's commitment at MSP's Staff Appreciation Barbeque in August. Her first job at the facility was as a steno clerk in 1975.

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the event. Many of the events were family-centered and included crafts and games for kids, along with a lunch cooked by Montana Department of Corrections staff.

Riverside Associate Warden Shane Biltoft said the day was a success due to the various DOC staff members who pitched in their time.

"I greatly appreciate the countless hours staff

dedicated to planning the event, as well as everyone who volunteered their time to make the day possible, including our Central Office staff who came to support us," he said. "Family Day provided inmates and their loved ones with a meaningful opportunity to reconnect, spend quality time together, and create positive memories, making it a truly successful and rewarding event for everyone involved."



Thank you to our probation and parole officers: DOC celebrates National Pretrial, Probation, and Parole Week, July 19-25, 2026



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