



RESPONSES TO COVID-19:

AGENCY OVERVIEWS, UPDATES, AND CHANGES IN SERVICE

April 10, 2020

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STATE ADMINISTRATION AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS INTERIM COMMITTEE (SAVA) AGENCY UPDATES

AGENCIES COVERED

This update covers the following agencies monitored by SAVA:

- Department of Military Affairs, including the:
 - Disaster and Emergency Services Division
 - Montana Veterans' Affairs Division
- Department of Administration
- Secretary of State's Office
- Commissioner of Political Practices
- Montana Public Employees Retirement Administration
- Teachers' Retirement System

DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS

COVID-19 TASK FORCE

On March 3, 2020, the governor established the COVID-19 Task Force, a multi-agency body that is coordinating the public health response, managing continuity of government efforts, and maintaining the lines of communication between state, federal and local entities.

The Task Force is lead by Maj. Gen. Quinn, The Adjutant General for Montana and head of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA).

Other COVID-19 Task Force members include:

- Department of Public Health and Human Services Director Sheila Hogan, along with her deputy director Laura Smith and State Medical Officer Dr. Greg Holzman

Maj. Gen. Quinn leads the [COVID-19 Task Force](#).
covid19info@mt.gov
1-888-333-0461

- Department of Administration Director John Lewis
- Department of Commerce Director Tara Rice
- Department of Labor and Industry Commissioner Brenda Nordlund
- The governor’s Chief of Staff Ali Bovington and Budget Director Tom Livers

DISASTER AND EMERGENCY SERVICES DIVISION & STATE EMERGENCY COORDINATION CENTER

Also on March 3, 2020, the **Disaster and Emergency Services Division (DES)** activated the State Emergency Coordination Center (SECC). This center is collecting and disseminating information in

The [State Emergency Coordination Center dashboard](#) includes situation updates county by county.

support of city and county efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is the focal point for the state’s emergency response and includes individuals from other state agencies. These other state agencies provide the SECC with expertise in information technology and cyber security, state finance, human resources, public relations, logistics, and medical services. A button on the COVID-19 Task Force webpage labeled “[get the latest updates](#)” provides a link to the SECC dashboard that includes situation updates county by county.

OTHER ACTIVITIES UNDER DMA

- **The director’s office** is coordinating funding, contracting, human resources, and payroll functions for National Guard members including for the activation of 73 guard members providing medical screenings of people entering Montana at airports, railway stations, and other ports of entry.
- **The Montana Veterans’ Affairs Division**, which employs the states’ Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) who help Montana veterans file claims with the federal VA, has instituted a plan for remote work and closed its main office at Ft. Harrison. State VSOs are using remote electronic communications and continue to assist veterans with their claims.
- **The Youth ChalleNGe** campus in Dillon is closed. Program cadre continue to contact students through electronic communications and provide weekly physical activity direction and coursework instruction to keep the students engaged.

Seventy-three national guard members have been activated to medically screen people entering Montana at airports and other ports

- **The STARBASE elementary school program** has closed and staff are working remotely on summer class plans.
- **Army and Air National Guard** construction projects are continuing.

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION

JOINT INFORMATION CENTER

The Department of Administration's incident management team is operating **Joint Information Center (JIC)** to provide a centralized information and communication in support of all state agencies, media outlets, private sector vendors who service and supply the state, businesses, employers, and the public. The [JIC's webpage](#) includes:

- Links to executive orders and emergency directives
- Info. from agencies involved on the COVID-19 Task Force
- Press releases and media alerts
- FAQ and other resources

The [Joint Information Center](#) webpage provides a centralized entry point for COVID-19 information.

OTHER ACTIVITIES UNDER THE DEPT. OF ADMINISTRATION

- **The State Information Technology Services Division (SITSD)** continues to provide support and solutions across all agencies to accommodate the move to a predominantly remote workforce. The division reports that the network is fully capable of handling the need for increased bandwidth. The agency is also stressing continued diligence and providing education regarding IT security protocols.
- **The State Human Resources Division** continues to issue guidance on a broad array of subjects, including use of COVID-19 leave available to state employees and the application of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and other recent federal legislation that impact payroll and other workforce activities.

SITSD is successfully accommodating a predominantly remote workforce for all state agencies.

- **The Financial Services Division** continues to generate payments as normal, to include the anticipated high volume of unemployment insurance payments in the coming weeks.
- **Print and mail services** staff continue to work onsite.
- **The Risk Management Division** is evaluating and processing COVID-19 claims for infectious disease cleanup and business income losses on behalf of state agencies and universities.

The department reports its **biggest challenge** right now is that call volumes are taxing the state's telecommunication infrastructure and this has had an impact on agency call centers. However, they are working through it.

SECRETARY OF STATE'S OFFICE

ELECTIONS

ALL-MAIL ELECTIONS AUTHORIZED

The governor issued an [emergency directive about elections](#) on March 25, 2020. The directive:

- Allowed schools that had not planned on conducting their May 4th school elections by mail to change their polling place elections to mail ballot elections.
- Allowed counties to choose to conduct the June 2 primary by mail. All 56 counties have opted to do so.

The governor's [emergency directive](#) allows school and primary elections to be conducted by mail.

EMERGENCY FUNDS AVIALABLE FOR CERTAIN COSTS

For counties that conduct the primary elections by mail, the governor's directive provides that:

- Postage for ballots returned by mail may be paid from available state or federal emergency funds.
- Counties may seek reimbursement for the return postage costs from the Department of Administration. (The department reports that it's Local Government Services Division will be the lead agency for county reimbursement requests.)
- Counties may seek additional reimbursements if additional federal emergency assistance is made available.

The federal CARES Act provides Montana with about \$3 million to “prepare for and respond to the coronavirus in the 2020 federal election cycle”. [See H.R. 748, pages 668-669.](#)

Other election funding details are still being worked out.

The federal [CARES Act](#) provides Montana with \$3 million for election costs.

COUNTY ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS SCRAMBLING BUT MANAGING

Mail ballot election plans - County election administrators have been scrambling to meet the April 3 deadline to submit mail ballot election plans for the June 2 primary to the Secretary of State’s office. However, the office has developed a streamlined form that has helped expedite the process.

Voter registration deadline moved - To minimize the need for in-person registration or lines for registration near the end of the election period, the close of regular voter registration provided in section [13-2-301\(1\)\(a\)](#), MCA, is suspended under the governor's emergency directive until May 26th.

Early in-person voting - The governor's directive requires that early in-person voting be accommodated beginning 30 days before the June 2 primary elections. This was to address concerns about the impact of all-mail elections on voters in Indian Country as well as voters with disabilities who may need access to accessible voting machines.

Ballot drop box locations - The governor's directive also requires county election administrators to establish ballot drop off locations.

Physical distancing plans - County election administrators are also working to establish, implement, and enforce physical distancing policies at all in-person voting and ballot drop box locations.

A [MACo webpage](#) provides county election administrators with numerous election-related resources.

OTHER SEC. OF STATE ACTIVITIES CONTINUE

The Secretary of State's Office reports that its office is still open to the public and that it continues to provide uninterrupted business, administrative rule, and records services. However, most staff are conducting office business with customers from home, while six staff continue to work on site.

More information is available at <https://sosmt.gov/>.

COMMISSIONER OF POLITICAL PRACTICES

- The office of the Commissioner of Political Practices (COPP) has implemented a work-from-home plan with no more than two staff working on-site at any one time.
- Campaign reporting deadlines have not changed. However, the office has received some requests for extensions and those are being handled on an individual basis.
- Commissioner Mangan and his staff may still be reached at 406-444-2942 or at cpphelp@mt.gov. Website: <https://politicalpractices.mt.gov/>

MONTANA PUBLIC EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT ADMINISTRATION

- The Montana Public Employee Retirement Administration (MPERA) has successfully implemented its remote work plan, so there has been virtually no interruption of services to pension plan members or employers.
- The member and employer call center information is prominently displayed on the MPERA website at <https://mpera.mt.gov/>.
- The agency's essential operations involve reviewing, finalizing and paying retirement benefits, disability benefits, and hardship withdrawals for MPERA's public employee pension plans and the states' deferred compensation plan.
- The **special pension risk analysis and stress test report** for PERS requested as part of the legislative finance study of potential budget pressure points is now available for review on the [SAVA pension webpage](#).
- PERS Board meetings have been postponed until further notice.

Pension risk analysis reports for PERS and TRS are available on [SAVA's pension webpage](#).

- The annual actuarial valuations of MPERA's retirement systems will be conducted as usual and provide a snap shot of pension funding status as of June 30, 2020. These valuations will include the dramatic investment losses incurred since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. SAVA will be monitoring the public employee pension plan funding status and receiving the valuation reports when they are completed in mid- to late October.

TEACHERS RETIREMENT SYSTEM (TRS)

- Executive Director Shawn Graham reports that 17 of TRS's 21 employees are working remotely until further notice and that any needs for staff to come into the office are scheduled at staggered times to ensure continuity of workflow while implementing social distancing measures.
- The four staff members not working remotely are the receptionist/administrative assistant, two Mail/Imaging positions to open and deliver mail to the appropriate work unit twice per day, and the Executive Director.
- TRS has and will be processing approximately 600 new retirement applications between March 1 through June 30.
- All in-person retirement counseling sessions have been converted to virtual/teleconference meetings.
- Monthly retirement benefits and daily deposits of retirement plan contributions are proceeding as normally scheduled.
- As mentioned for MPERA, the **special pension risk analysis and stress test report** for TRS requested as part of the legislative finance study of potential budget pressure points is now available for review on the SAVA webpage and under the LFC pension subcommittee page.
- The annual actuarial valuations of TRS will be conducted as usual and will provide a snap shot of TRS's funding status as of June 30, 2020. The valuation will include the dramatic investment losses incurred since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. SAVA will be monitoring the TRS funding status and receiving the valuation report when it is completed in mid- to late October.

Pension funds have incurred dramatic investment losses since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis.