

COVID-19 relief funds boost health emergency preparedness and response at DOC facilities, complement existing COVID-19 safety precautions

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Ensuring the health and safety of Montana Department of Corrections (DOC) staff and inmates has been the top priority of the department throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; recent purchases through COVID-19 relief funds are taking those efforts to the next level.

“COVID-19 has presented us all with a new landscape to navigate and we are grateful for the guidance and support we have received from our partners on the local, state, and federal levels,” said DOC Director Reginald D. Michael. “This relief funding provides our staff with additional tools to prepare for, and more efficiently respond to, our state’s current health emergency and those that may arise in the future.”

The DOC has purchased, or is in the process of purchasing, about \$1 million in equipment to help mitigate the risk of COVID-19 at its state-owned and contracted facilities. Those purchases include whole-room disinfectant machines; standard disinfectant machines; telemedicine units; infrared, no-contact thermometers; handwash stations; remote blood pressure stations; transport vehicles for moving offenders among facilities (capable of isolating driver from patients); small transport vehicles for moving offenders from units to infirmary (capable of isolating driver from patients); and more.

“These purchases will help us to further reduce the possibility of the virus entering our facilities,” said Connie Winner, administrator of the DOC’s Clinical Services Division. “Telemedicine equipment allows us to provide necessary and essential medical and mental health care for our offenders while decreasing off-site medical transports, and the health risks associated with moving offenders during a pandemic. Additionally, disinfectant machines will allow rooms and vehicles to be cleaned and sanitized more efficiently, enhancing the department’s ability to keep the environment safe for offenders and staff.”

In addition, the safety precautions that have been in place at DOC facilities since COVID-19 emerged in Montana are numerous. The department looked to its Clinical Services staff, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), local health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Interim Guidance on Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 in Correctional and Detention Facilities for advice in its virus response. Safety measures include:

- Education of staff and inmates about how to recognize the symptoms of COVID-19, and how to prevent the spread of the virus through good personal hygiene, social distancing, use of personal protective equipment.
- Increased cleaning and disinfection efforts.
- Provision of cloth face masks for inmates and staff members to wear — mask use is mandatory for DOC employees inside secure facilities. The DOC’s Montana Correctional Enterprises produces an assortment of PPE including cloth face masks, face shields, N95 masks, shoe covers and more.
- Daily screening and temperature checks of staff members as they arrive at work.
- Suspended in-person visitation. Inmates receive one free phone call and one free video visit every week to help them remain in contact with family and friends.
- Sentinel testing for COVID-19.

The DOC also closely monitors offender movement into its secure facilities by requiring advance evaluation of all inmate transports by DOC Clinical Services staff. Offenders are screened before they leave their facility of

origin and on arrival at DOC facilities. New arrivals at Montana State Prison, Montana Women’s Prison and Pine Hills Correctional Facility are quarantined for 14 days and are offered COVID-19 testing at intake.

“The challenges that COVID-19 present to congregate settings across Montana are complex,” said DPHHS Director Sheila Hogan. “During this time, state public health officials are in constant communication with the Centers for Disease Control regarding current recommendations. That information is then communicated to local and tribal health jurisdictions, and shared with other agencies as appropriate, including the Department of Corrections (DOC). DPHHS continues to consult with DOC regarding the various public health protocols that are being implemented to protect both inmates and staff.”

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