



**Greg Gianforte, Governor | Brian M. Gootkin, Director**

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As required by HB 693 Section 1(2) the Montana Department of Corrections (DOC) is providing this report to the Law and Justice Interim Committee and the Legislative Finance Committee. The report provides information on the rental voucher\* program and identifies where the voucher program is being used based on the location of expenditures and the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

**Rental Voucher Program History and Information:**

The 2017 Legislature authorized the DOC to provide rental vouchers to offenders unable to secure suitable housing. Creation of a rental voucher program was authorized as part of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative and was meant to provide financial resources to offenders releasing from prison to assist with access to safe, permanent housing. Because no funding was provided for the program at that time, DOC was unable to implement a rental voucher program. The program was implemented in fiscal year 2020 after the 2019 Legislature appropriated \$200,000 per fiscal year to DOC for the program. The 2021 Legislature continued the appropriation at the same funding level for the current biennium.

In accordance with statute, DOC adopted Administrative Rule establishing criteria for offender eligibility for vouchers. Probation & Parole officers or other DOC staff refer offenders to the program prior to release from prison. DOC staff consider offender financial resources, as well as correctional status, when determining eligibility. Offenders determined eligible and in need of a rental voucher are authorized for up to 3 months of rental assistance. Payments are made directly to landlords and may not be made to offender family members unless the family member is a bona fide landlord.

In fiscal year 2021, the average amount paid per voucher was less than \$500. During the same period, the average cost to house an offender in Montana State Prison for one month was \$3,750.68 (\$123.31 per day), while the cost to house an offender at Montana Women’s Prison for one month was \$3,930.44 (\$129.22 per day). The availability of a rental voucher eliminates a financial barrier to release and prevents offenders granted parole from lingering in prison due to lack of available funds.

**Location of Rental Voucher Expenditures by Fiscal Year:**

- i. Fiscal Year 2020: 335 rental vouchers were approved; however, not all approved rental vouchers were used. Expenditures were distributed geographically as follows:

Location	Expended	Number of Offenders
Anaconda	\$550.00	1
Billings	\$72,875.30	119
Butte	\$5,595.00	9
Deer Lodge	\$400.00	1
Great Falls	\$4,605.00	7



Helena	\$21,610.00	41
Kalispell	\$1,400.00	2
Miles City	\$1,800.00	1
Missoula	\$27,675.04	37
Ronan	\$500.00	1
Shelby	\$975.00	1
Out of State	\$750.00	1

- ii. Fiscal Year 2021: 480 rental vouchers were approved; however, not all approved rental vouchers were used. Expenditures were distributed geographically as follows:

Location	Expended	Number of Offenders
Anaconda	\$2,550.00	4
Billings	\$127,248.42	159
Butte	\$7,950.00	12
Deer Lodge	\$600.00	2
Dillon	\$957.00	1
Great Falls	\$7,175.84	7
Havre	\$500.00	1
Helena	\$24,725.00	38
Kalispell	\$400.00	1
Miles City	\$1,022.00	3
Missoula	\$53,155.95	52
Polson	\$1,675.00	3
Ronan	\$500.00	1
St. Ignatius	\$650.00	1
Out of State	\$1,500.00	1

- iii. Fiscal Year 2022: 139 rental vouchers were approved; however, not all approved rental vouchers were used. Expenditures were distributed geographically as follows:

Location	Expended	Number of Offenders
Anaconda	\$1,100.00	1
Billings	\$32,558.90	59
Bozeman	\$850.00	1
Butte	\$3,675.00	4
Conrad	\$1,200.00	1
Great Falls	\$6,685.00	8
Helena	\$7,450.00	12
Missoula	\$5,750.00	9
Ronan	\$500.00	1
Out of State	\$125.00	1

### **Strengths of the Program:**

- i. The program provides a funding source for safe, stable housing for individuals releasing from custody.
- ii. The average cost per rental voucher in fiscal year 2022 was less than \$500, which is a minimal investment for supporting a key component of successful community reintegration. This provides a savings to taxpayers if an offender would otherwise be incarcerated at a much greater expense due to lack of transitional housing.
- iii. The program partners with Probation & Parole officers to ensure offenders are referred to other support services to meet court-ordered requirements and individual needs.
- iv. The program makes payments directly to landlords, decreasing the risk of funds being diverted by offenders.

### **Weaknesses of the Program:**

- i. Per statute, the funds may only be used for rent. They cannot be used for other housing-related expenses, such as application fees and deposits. DOC recommends statutory revision to allow rental voucher funds to be used for housing-related expenses.
- ii. Per statute, the funds may only be used for individuals releasing from prison on parole. It may not be used to assist offenders releasing from other facility types or onto other supervision statuses. DOC recommends statutory revision to allow all offenders on community supervision by DOC to be eligible for rental vouchers, no matter their supervision status.
- iii. The program has no regulatory authority over vendors to influence application processes and related fees, eviction processes, or the remittance of funds should an individual leave the residence prior to the end of a month. DOC is working closely with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services on efforts to implement a certifying body for recovery residences in Montana. The certification process will require annual certification and assure compliance with standards established by the National Alliance for Recovery Residences (NARR). DOC serves as an ex-officio member of the board of that entity. Once a significant number of recovery residences in Montana have been certified, DOC intends to amend ARMs to require vendors classified as recovery residences to be certified in order to receive rental voucher funds.

\* *A rent voucher generally equals one month of rent. However, DOC was authorized to use rental vouchers for housing deposits during FYs 21-22 based on the COVID-19 state of emergency.*