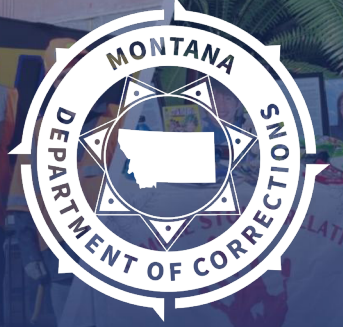


Quarterly Update

Spring Edition 2026



Creating A Safer Montana Through Accountability, Rehabilitation & Empowerment

Flathead Valley Reentry Center welcomes Gov. Gianforte for visit, “graduates” first resident



May was a big month for the Flathead Valley Reentry Center (FVRC) in Evergreen. Not only did Governor Greg Gianforte stop by as part of his 56 County Tour, but the center celebrated its first resident to successfully complete the program.

The new facility opened its doors to residents in November 2025. FVRC is the state’s first prerelease center operated by the Montana Department of Corrections rather than a contractor. The Montana Legislature funded the center during the 2023 session.

Governor, Page 10



Q&A with DOC's new Deputy Director Natalia Bowser



Natalia Bowser was selected as the Montana Department of Corrections' new deputy director in March.

"We are at a pivotal time for the department as we prepare for the future of corrections in our state," said DOC Director Eric Strauss. "Natalia has a proven ability to get things done, and cares deeply about our people and our mission."

Bowser joined the team at the DOC in August 2025 as Innovation chief, overseeing project management, research and analytics, security technology, desistance initiatives, comprehensive safety culture, and infrastructure improvements.

Prior to that, she served as director of the Montana Board of Crime Control for seven years. She also held various positions in Finance and Operations at the Montana Highway Patrol between 2003 and 2018.

Deputy Director, you have been in your new position for a couple of

months now. How's it going so far?

The transition has been exciting, humbling and incredibly rewarding. Stepping into this role has given me an even greater appreciation for the work our employees do every day across the department.

One of my biggest priorities has been listening and learning. Building relationships and understanding the realities our staff face is important to me. This can only be done by seeing people and the operations firsthand.

As Deputy Director, what areas are you most focused on right now?

A major focus for me is culture, communication, and leadership. I want employees to feel supported, valued, and heard, and I believe leadership at every level shapes the culture of an organization.

I am also focused on finding ways to strengthen operations and continue to improve how we do the work each day.

What opportunities and challenges do you see across the department?

Utilization of staffing in the most effective way and retention continue to be challenges. This is demanding work, and our employees carry a tremendous responsibility.

At the same time, I see a real opportunity to strengthen communication, invest in leadership development, and continue building a culture where employees want to come to work each day.

What has stood out to you most about the DOC since stepping into this role?

What has stood out most to me is the professionalism and resilience of our staff. The work happening across this department is challenging and often goes unseen by the public, but employees continue to show up and serve with dedication.

I have also been impressed by how much people genuinely care about each other, the mission, and making a positive impact.

What message would you like employees across the department to hear from you right now?

I want employees to know their work matters and is appreciated. This department is built on the dedication of the people who show up every day to serve others and support public safety and rehabilitation.

I also want employees to know that leadership is listening, and building a strong, supportive culture is a priority as we continue moving the department forward together.

“What has stood out most to me is the professionalism and resilience of our staff. The work happening across this department is challenging and often goes unseen by the public, but employees continue to show up and serve with dedication.”
~ Deputy Director Natalia Bowser



MSP Construction Updates: Inmates gain on-the-job work experience, cell installation begins



For the past year, crews have steadily worked on the construction of new low-side housing units at Montana State Prison (MSP). The efforts are part of a larger infrastructure investment by the state to build additional bedspace and bring corrections into the future.

This spring, a crew of inmate workers had the opportunity to gain on-the-job training while assisting contractor Sletten Construction's team at the work site.

Matt McCullough, a project manager for Sletten Construction, said the inmate crew has been a great asset assisting with the everyday work.

"They're willing to do anything we need them to do, and they show up every day," McCullough said. "They work

hard and they do a great job. They're supplementing our normal crew, so they're allowing us to do a lot more work in the same period of time than we typically would be able to do if we didn't have the three gentlemen out here with us."

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.

Construction, Page 9



DOC sets up K9 unit to deploy this fall

The Montana Department of Corrections' newest hires this fall will have four legs, wagging tails and furry ears as the DOC prepares to deploy its first K9 unit across the state.

During the 2025 legislature, the DOC was allocated \$447, 800 in HB2 to set up a K9 unit. The unit will use dogs for drug sweeps in offender's homes and at DOC secure facilities like Montana State Prison. In the past, the DOC relied on community partners, like the Montana Highway Patrol and local sheriff's offices, to conduct drug sweeps and other dog-related tasks.

"We're excited to add this unit to the department and see how it improves safety for staff members and the people we supervise," said DOC Director Eric Strauss. "We take numerous measures to keep our facilities free of contraband, but we're always looking for more ways to do that with greater success. The

K9 unit will be available to conduct sweeps when we need them without having to wait on outside resources. We also look forward to supporting our law enforcement partners across Montana like they have done for us in the past."

In February, the department selected four probation officers for the K9 unit: Eric Mertz from Shelby, Kayla Zidack and Andy Laux from Billings, and Brianne Marshall from Kalispell. The DOC is working to acquire two dual purpose dogs for apprehension and drug detection, and two single purpose dogs with one for drug detection and one for electronic detection.

Once they are trained, the dogs will be brought to Montana so the officers can train with them for a month. The training for handlers will take place in DOC secure facilities to get the dogs acclimated to the prison environment. The department anticipates receiving

the dogs this summer.

Although the K9s aren't here yet, officers are already hard at work preparing for their arrival. The members of the team are attending training with other law enforcement agencies and participated in the K9 Ford Deployment Readiness program. Another training they'll complete this spring is decoy training, where they will learn how to be a good decoy when training their dogs wearing bite suits.

The department expects the K9 unit to be operational by this fall.

"Now that the department has selected handlers, as a team we have begun to build a bond," Marshall said. "The excitement increases as we attend trainings, network with our local law enforcement and patiently wait to meet our new dogs. The K9 unit is going to be a huge asset to the DOC."



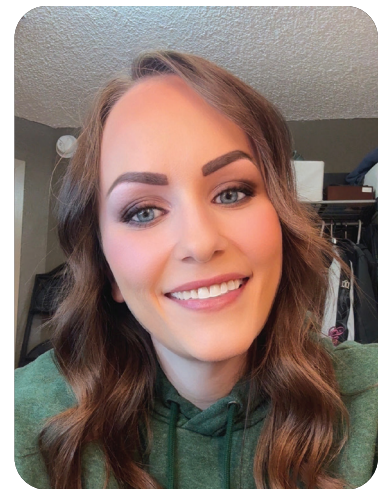
*Andy Laux
Billings P&P*



*Brianne Marshall
Kalispell P&P*



*Eric Mertz
Shelby P&P*



*Kayla Zidack
Billings P&P*



DOC launches Correction/Detention Officer Basic class at MSP

The Montana Department of Corrections launched its inaugural Correction/Detention Officer Basic (CDOB) class at Montana State Prison in May.

“The DOC’s demand for this training exceeds what is available to us through the Montana Law Enforcement Academy (MLEA) at this time, so we’re very thankful the Public Safety Officer Standards and Training Council (POST) allowed us to host our own class to meet that need,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss.

The DOC class mirrors the CDOB class offered at MLEA, which holds the three-week course five or six times a year. The DOC is allotted 10 student positions in each class. The course — which involves 160 hours of in-person and online training combined — covers human behavior, correction and detention operations, and corrections and detentions proficiencies.

Montana law requires all correctional officers to complete the basic course within one year of their date of hire. In February 2026, when the DOC proposed the concept of hosting its own CDOB class to the POST council, 107 DOC correctional officers were within the one-year timeframe to receive the training. Through the

MLEA course, the DOC has been averaging 60 graduates a year.

“The DOC has a seven-member professional training team that already coordinates our Probation and Parole course at MLEA among numerous other trainings,” Strauss said. “The establishment of the DOC’s CDOB course was a natural expansion for them and should put us in a solid position to get our correctional officers POST-certified in a timely manner.”

Class participant Winston Ferryman said he was impressed with the DOC’s first CDOB effort.

“I appreciated having the class here at MSP with instructors from MSP and Montana Women’s Prison,” he said. “Having their real world knowledge made it so much more meaningful to the people in the class.”

To ensure all training requirements were met, the Montana POST Council audited the class and MLEA proctored it. Graduation for the 24 participants of the class was held May 29 at the Rialto Theatre in Deer Lodge.



Technology Updates: DOC rolls out updated TASER training, equips officers with body cameras

During the 2025 Legislature, the Montana Department of Corrections was allocated \$1.6 million for new body cameras and TASERS. The initial funding was intended for the startup and implementation of the program, including early deployment, equipment, training, and supporting technology. Over the past six months, the DOC has trained probation and parole and correctional officers to use the new equipment.

TASER 10 Training

In November 2025, the DOC began region-wide training for the department's new TASER 10s. One of the newest components is virtual reality (VR) training.

The eight-hour training course includes classwork and the chance to try on a pair of VR goggles to work through real life scenarios. These scenarios range from de-escalation, searching cells and handling individuals with weapons. So far, the department has trained 199 officers along with 29 instructors and two master instructors.

The virtual reality offers a hands-on approach that saves the department money.

"We're excited to officially roll out the TASER 10 devices across the Department of Corrections and facilities," said Bre Lewis, one of the TASER master trainers. "This upgrade provides our staff with

improved technology and additional tools that support both staff and public safety. The implementation has gone smoothly, and we're looking forward to the positive impact these new devices will have throughout our facilities and daily operations."

Axon Body Worn Cameras

Another new technology addition for DOC public safety officers is the AXON body worn cameras.

The small black cameras will be worn by correctional and probation and parole officers. There are 22 trainers that will travel across the state this spring to begin training employees. The training includes using the docking stations, how to operate them and logging the footage.

In Billings, the Montana Women's Prison was the pilot facility. Officers began wearing body cameras in December 2025. As of May, all the MWP officers wear cameras.

Warden Katie Weston said she's heard a lot of positive feedback from staff members.

"The body worn cameras have already helped with videos for training, investigations and seem to help with inmate behavior," she said. "It's also great for evidence collection. We review incidents weekly and it has immensely

helped this process. It's nice to have audio and video of the incidents so we can better understand behaviors during these events."



A day in the life of an offender: DOC offers re-entry simulation to Leadership Helena class



Emily Cadonau visits with the medical services table during a reentry simulation offered by the DOC.

Emily Cadonau has never worried about returning to Helena after a stint in prison, but it's a reality for thousands of Montanans re-entering communities after time with the Montana Department of Corrections. In a reentry simulation in April, the Leadership Helena class got a small taste of what DOC offenders encounter when returning to the community.

Katie Weston, the Montana Women's Prison warden, oversaw the simulation for the group.

"The reentry simulation is a great tool used to educate the public and our employees about how hard life can be post-release," Weston said. "When we gather people in a room and talk about the hard issues related to probation and parole and release from prison, we can gain a better understanding of how we can help these individuals."

The simulation began with the participants receiving a packet with their character's story and a list of tasks. Each character sheet included expenses they had to pay weekly and other information, like if they had housing or a job. Some packets included money and IDs, while others did not.

The activity simulates 30 days post-release from prison, and participants try to complete the tasks on their sheet. During each 20-minute week, participants moved between different stations, including an ID station, a probation and parole office, and employment. At some stations, participants drew a card that could affect what they were trying to accomplish, like whether they passed a drug test.

Throughout the simulation, participants naturally encountered issues like running out of money or getting into jail.

While participants didn't walk away with a prize for completing their tasks, they did gain a better understanding of the realities offenders face upon returning to Montana communities.

"It has been an extremely educational experience," Cadonau said. "You have the opportunity to start to understand the many steps that occur when re-entering the community and recognize the stress that comes with it."



MWP Warden Katie Weston oversaw the reentry simulation offered to the Leadership Helena class.



DOC traveling exhibit brings awareness to victims of crime



The Montana Department of Corrections Victim Services team has been working hard to make members of the community aware of the impact crime has on its victims with its traveling exhibit, Empty Place at the Table.

The exhibit features place settings at a table provided by the families of crime victims and survivors of crime. For viewers, the table represents the loss of loved ones or some part of themselves because of a criminal act against them. Displays include personal items from victims and survivors of homicide, DUI/fatality, robbery, burglary, murdered and missing indigenous persons, childhood sexual assault, and rape survivors.

“This exhibit is a great opportunity for members of the community to

learn about the important work our Victim Services team does,” DOC Director Eric Strauss said. “Empty Place at the Table is a traveling exhibit that puts a face to crime in Montana and allows families to share stories about their loved ones. It’s a stark reminder of the impact of crime.”

Victim Services brought two exhibits to western Montana this spring. The first event was in Dillon and the second was at a Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) Awareness Day event in Missoula. The MMIP event featured place settings curated by indigenous families.

“Through this partnership, survivor voices are brought together to strengthen awareness and response to Missing or Murdered

Indigenous Persons,” DOC Victim Services Bureau Chief Jamie Rogers said. “This collaboration fosters education, dialogue, and community-driven efforts toward prevention, healing, and justice. The DOC is committed to supporting awareness efforts and strengthening partnerships that help bring safety, visibility, and justice to Indigenous people across our state.”

The DOC believes that once the court process is over, victims and their families should be supported. The mission of Victim Services is to inform, involve, educate and empower crime victims while enhancing community safety through positive collaboration. For more information about the Empty Place at the Table program or other Victim Services programs, visit the DOC website at www.cor.mt.gov.



Construction, Page 3

The existing low-side housing capacity at MSP is 803. With the completion of construction of the new units and renovations to the D unit, housing capacity will increase to 1,783. Construction is expected to be completed by January 2029.

The three-man inmate work crew was selected by DOC staff members and have worked on the site for several months. The group has a variety of construction

experience. They help with jobs like cleaning, concrete work and framing.

For Nathan Thayne and the others, it’s a time when they can feel normal.

“The best part has been getting to be outside and meet the construction workers,” Thane said. “I’d like to learn as much as I can with carpentry and construction.”

Cells installed in new construction

In April, Sletten Construction began installing prefabricated cells in the MSP low side housing project. The cells include two beds, a sink and a toilet. There are individuals stalls for showers and an ADA accessible stall as well.

The roofing is now complete on Unit J/K and the flooring for the mezzanine is constructed.

“Our secure facilities are not adequate to support our increasing prison population and the evolving needs for the people we supervise,” DOC Director Eric Strauss said. “We’re thankful for the support of the legislators and Governor Gianforte who provided \$701.5 million over two legislative sessions for improvement to the DOC’s secure infrastructure. These new units will keep staff and inmates safe with improved line of sight, up-to-date technology and versatility for use.”



DOC transfers all out-of-state inmates to Mississippi

In April, the Montana Department of Corrections completed the last of three inmate transports placing all 600 of its out-of-state inmates at the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility in Mississippi.

“This decision to concentrate our entire out-of-state male prison population in one location allows the department to provide greater consistency to our out-of-state inmates while being efficient and focused in leveraging our contracts,” said Director Eric Strauss. “With this transfer, inmates will have improved access to services and opportunities including jobs, programming, and education.”

Prior to the recent moves, 360 Montana inmates were held at Saguaro Correctional Center in Eloy, Arizona, while the other 240 were already housed at the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility in Mississippi.

During the 2023 and 2025 Montana Legislative Sessions, lawmakers and the governor dedicated funding for out-of-state adult male prison beds to help alleviate ongoing critical overcrowding in Montana’s prisons.

To address the issue for the long term, legislators allocated and the governor secured \$306 million to build five new units at Montana State Prison which will add more than 900 beds. The units are expected to open in January 2029.

“We’re extremely grateful to Governor Gianforte and Montana legislators for their investment in our correctional infrastructure,” Director Strauss said. “The new units will allow us to bring our out-of-state inmates back to Montana to receive the services they need to succeed when they return to the community. In addition, they can be closer to their loved ones while they prepare for that.”

Governor, Page 1

“By helping offenders find employment, access resources, and reconnect with their families, this center is giving Montanans a better opportunity to successfully rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities,” Gov. Gianforte said. “Together, we’re promoting a safer community by providing our returning citizens with the support they need.”

During his visit at FVRC, Governor Gianforte toured resident rooms, programming areas, spoke with staff members, and visited with current residents, including Jason Williamson, the program’s first resident released back to the community. As of May 21, 2026, 39 residents lived at FVRC as the DOC gears up to host its full capacity of 90 adult males. About 88% of the residents at the new facility were sentenced from Flathead, Lake, and Lincoln counties. Before the FVRC opened, these individuals would have been distributed among prerelease facilities in other areas of the state.

“I was supposed to be going to Great Falls and that’s like 200 miles away,” said Williamson. “With my wife and children, I wasn’t going to have her drive the kids over

the pass in the winter. It’s a long ways. So when they opened it up here I was able to transfer and that was a very big deal to be local. When I got my passes and visits I was able to see my wife and children.”

“The new Flathead Valley Reentry Center promotes safer communities by providing the means for offenders to reestablish themselves in their community after incarceration with the structure and guidance to do so successfully,” said DOC Director Eric Strauss. “They can reconnect with their families, get settled in their careers, and develop the support systems they will need moving forward – all in the community they call home.”

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“The new Flathead Valley Reentry Center promotes safer communities by providing the means for offenders to reestablish themselves in their community after incarceration with the structure and guidance to do so successfully.”

~ DOC Director Eric Strauss



Spring at the DOC



Congratulations to Unit Manager Nancy Sharkey who retired in February after 19 years at MSP. Nancy is pictured with her two sons, Correctional Major John Sharkey (left) and Correctional Sergeant Ryan Sharkey (right), who also work at MSP.



Office of Public Instruction Superintendent Susie Hedalen visited with staff at MSP and Deputy Superintendent Craig Barringer met with staff at Pine Hills Correctional Facility in April.



At MSP, members of the Cowboy Crew helped welcome new calves into the world. The Montana Correctional Enterprises agriculture program provides inmates with training in horsemanship, herd management, horse-shoeing, and range management.



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