

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MONTANA

Steve Bullock  
GOVERNOR



Mike Cooney  
LT. GOVERNOR

September 22, 2020

Dear MSPOA Members:

First, on behalf of the state, thank you for your leadership and commitment to public safety. Many of you and your deputies are on the frontline of this pandemic and I truly appreciate the hard work and sacrifices you and your department have made during this time. I share your concerns about the impacts of COVID-19 to our county jail and state prison systems. My administration recognizes we are partners in dealing with this pandemic and I appreciate the hard work done both at a county level and the state level to mitigate this disease and outbreaks in our facilities. We will continue to work with you to take the most appropriate and safe steps to protect both the inmates and those whose job it is to safely and effectively run our jails and correctional facilities.

Since day one of this pandemic, the Montana Department of Corrections' response to the crisis has been guided by the Center for Disease Control, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, local health departments, and its own clinical services staff. When the department has limited the transport of offenders it has done so at the advice and guidance of medical and public health officials to mitigate further spread among state inmate populations.

Prior to COVID-19, the department had cut in half the number of offenders being held in county jails from nearly 500 on any given day five years ago, to an average of about 220. As you are aware, the daily reimbursement rate is set by the legislature and requires statutory change to increase.

Throughout this pandemic, the department has continued to transport offenders from local jails to its facilities as quickly and safely as possible. At times, we have suspended transport from communities with outbreaks in their detention facilities in consultation with health officials. Our ability to continue transport from facilities with active outbreaks is limited by the number of quarantine beds the department has available. Recognizing the strain this places on our local partners, the department is actively exploring other avenues to address its quarantine needs, and we stand ready to assist Montana sheriffs in any way feasible.

Our public health officials have counseled the best way to keep COVID-19 out of congregate care facilities is to take the public health precautions necessary to contain the spread in our communities. As we've discussed previously, as leaders in your community, your voice matters in encouraging people to wear masks, maintain social distancing and avoid large gatherings.

These practices are all critical both inside and outside your facilities to mitigate the spread of the virus. Analysis by state epidemiologists shows that staff were the initial source of more than 50% of the outbreaks in detention centers.

I hope we can be united in purpose to control the spread of COVID-19 and protect our communities. I have attached a document received from the White House yesterday that encourages states to issue fines for failure to wear masks in areas of high transmission. While I am not encouraging MSPOA to adopt this enforcement approach, the White House recommendations reinforce that if we are going to limit transmission in our communities and detention centers, we all need to be doing more.

Thank you again for raising the concerns, which we all share and have been working to address during this pandemic. I have directed Director Michael to continue to execute the department's plan to get more of the state's prisoners to our state facilities in a safe manner, particularly from those counties that are seeing outbreaks in their jails. I know several of you have my cell phone and I encourage you to give me a call as you have concerns or need resources to address the pandemic.

Sincerely,



STEVE BULLOCK  
Governor