Minnesota Department of Corrections Commissioner Paul Schnell has appointed members to his Executive Team.

**Safia Khan Named Government Relations Director**

Commissioner Paul Schnell has appointed Safia Khan to serve as Government Relations Director on his Executive Team.

Khan is currently the Director of Policy and Programming for the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (MCBW), where she has worked extensively on public policy pertaining to gender-based violence within Minnesota’s criminal and legal justice systems over the last decade.

In recent years, Khan has partnered with the DOC to identify and address victim safety needs in post-conviction processes. Her work has included leading the Minnesota Domestic Violence Collaborative, a partnership between statewide criminal justice systems and advocacy organizations, including the DOC, to address domestic violence related policy issues. She also tracks and analyzes data pertaining to domestic violence homicides and authors MCBW’s annual Femicide Report.

As part of MCBW’s policy work, Khan led and collaborated on legislative and administrative policy at the local, state, and federal level. She has provided expertise and leadership on various initiatives, including the following: batterer intervention programming, evidence-based policies and practices related to accountability and community supervision, firearms prohibition and surrender, nonconsensual dissemination of private images, law enforcement body camera data privacy and transparency, expungement of criminal records, lethality assessments, technology facilitated stalking, protective orders, and offender accountability in domestic and sexual violence committed by high profile perpetrators. Khan’s efforts to advance public policy for victims earned her the Minnesota County Attorneys Association’s Public Service Award in 2017.

Outside of her employment, Khan serves on the Board of Directors of the Battered Women’s Justice Project, and is a public member representing victims’ interests on the Governor’s Criminal and Juvenile Justice Information Advisory Council. In the past, she has also served on the boards of the Minnesota Women’s Consortium, the Summit Hill Association, and the United Nations Association of Minnesota.

Khan received her B.A. in Political Science from Denison University, where she was a fellow of the Richard G. Lugar Program in Politics and Public Service and served as a summer adviser to Pakistan’s Ambassador to the United Nations. She began her career as an assistant at a legal aid office in Pakistan. Khan is fluent in Urdu, Hindi, and English.

“I am honored to serve as Government Relations Director under Commissioner Schnell,” said Khan. “I look forward to the privilege of engaging with DOC stakeholders and policymakers in...
order to support the work of DOC personnel, ensuring offender change through accountability and rehabilitation, and promoting the safety of staff, offenders, victims, and all Minnesotans.”

Sarah Walker Named Deputy Commissioner of the Community Services Division

Commissioner Paul Schnell has appointed Sarah Walker to serve as the Deputy Commissioner of Community Services on his Executive Team.

Walker currently works in government affairs and public relations with MZA + Co where she focuses on issues in public safety, corrections, and the judiciary. She is also an instructor at Metropolitan State University in the Masters of Public Leadership program. She previously spent seven years as the Chief Operating Officer at 180 Degrees and was the founder of the Minnesota Second Chance Coalition. Walker also previously served as the Research Director at the Council on Crime and Justice, Director of Workforce Development at the Center for Court Innovation, and Executive Director of the Youth Justice Funding Collaborative.

Walker serves as a board member of All Square and is on the research advisory board for the Justice Research Council, and her past memberships include: William Mitchell Women’s Reentry Clinic, St. Paul African American Leadership Council, the Prison Policy Initiative, MN United for all Families, Ramsey County Juvenile Justice Advisory Initiative, and Penumbra. She is also a past member of the Minnesota Supreme Court’s Racial Fairness Committee and in 2010 was appointed to the Council on Black Minnesotans by Governor Pawlenty, and in 2011 she was appointed to the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission by Governor Dayton. From 2011 - 2015, Walker was the President of the Coalition for Impartial Justice that was advocating to protect the fair and impartial judiciary in Minnesota.

Walker was the recipient of the 2010 Minnesota Council of Non-Profits Statewide Advocacy Award, the 2010 Hennepin County Bar Association Advancing Justice Award, the 2011 Minnesota Association of Children’s Mental Health Outstanding Service Award in Juvenile Justice, and four-time recipient of the Politics in Minnesota’s Leaders in Public Policy Award (2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014). In 2016, she was named 40 under 40 by the Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal and in 2017 the Ramsey County Bar Association awarded her the Liberty Bell Award for Non-Lawyers.

Walker is a graduate of Carleton College and has completed doctoral work in the Department of Sociology at University of Minnesota. Prior to entering the Department of Sociology, she completed three years of doctoral work in the University of Minnesota’s Department of Political Science where she studied interest groups, social movements, and media framing of unpopular political issues. Walker brings extensive research experience to issues of politics, inequality,
criminal justice reform, and the role of philanthropic organizations in setting interest group agendas.

“I’m honored to accept this appointment, and I look forward to supporting Commissioner Schnell’s vision to ensure a safe environment for all employees—which includes our corrections agents in the community,” said Walker. “Additionally, I look forward to working with the community corrections agents and our valuable community partners to implement evidence-based solutions to address the cycle of recidivism and the high number of technical violations.”

Michelle Smith Named Deputy Commissioner of the Facilities Division

Commissioner Paul Schnell has appointed Michelle Smith to serve as the Deputy Commissioner of the Facilities Division on his Executive Team.

Smith is currently the Warden of MCF-Oak Park Heights.

Smith began her career at MCF-Shakopee in 1990 as a Correctional Counselor (now called Corrections Officer). There, she promoted through the Sergeant rank. In 1997, she transferred to MCF-Stillwater as a Lieutenant, then promoted to Corrections Program Director, Associate Warden of Administration, Associate Warden of Operations, and then Warden in 2011. In 2015, Smith was named Warden of the Oak Park Heights facility.

“I’m honored to take on this critical role in our department. I’m grateful for the staff at Oak Park Heights who have given me their best over these years, and for the many other staff I have worked with in the past,” said Smith. “I look forward to helping implement Commissioner Schnell’s vision for the department—specifically focusing on staff safety and supporting programming that helps offenders succeed in the community.”

Marcus Schmit Named Assistant Commissioner of the Operations Support Division

Commissioner Paul Schnell has appointed Marcus Schmit to serve as Assistant Commissioner of the Operations Support Division on his Executive Team.

Schmit is currently the Director of Advocacy for Second Harvest Heartland where he is responsible for a multifaceted advocacy strategy that engages state and federal policymakers, organizational partners, staff, the board of directors, and other organizations. Schmit also served on the organization’s federal policy committee and acted as organizational spokesperson for community events.
While with Second Harvest Heartland, Schmit established new cross-sector strategic partnerships while expanding the organization’s visibility and profile at local, state, and national levels. He also facilitated internal collaboration and maximized organizational branding and support.

Previously, Schmit was Director of Legislative Relations for MNsure, where he worked directly with the Chief Executive Officer and board of directors to create and drive an effective public affairs and legislative strategy. There, he leveraged strategic planning around a positive and transparent work environment. He also chaired the organization’s health industry stakeholder task force, led the board of directors’ policy committee, and represented the organization before state and federal legislative bodies.

Schmit also previously served as the District Director for then Congressional Representative Tim Walz. In this role, he fostered organizational collaboration and led the staff responsible for district-based administration, constituent services, communications, scheduling, and disaster emergency response.

Schmit has a Master of Public Policy degree from the Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Gustavus Adolphus College. He was also awarded a Research Fellowship with the National Science Foundation.

“I am honored to serve as Assistant Commissioner for Operations alongside my hardworking colleagues at the Minnesota Department of Corrections,” said Schmit. “I share Commissioner Schnell’s vision for prioritizing safety and security at our facilities and will always put people first — assessing current operations, implementing new systems, seeking needed investment, and retaining and recruiting a talented team. I am humbled to contribute to this important work and look forward to collaborating with my colleagues at the Department of Corrections to ensure a safer Minnesota.”