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Contact: Nick Kimball, Communications Director

651-600-0920

Nicholas.Kimball@state.mn.us

DOC COVID-19 Media Update: April 24, 2020

DOC increases COVID-19 testing capacity, highlights population management strategies

ST. PAUL, Minn. – The Minnesota Department of Corrections continues its ongoing collaboration with the Department of Health for guidance around CDC protocols for the prevention and management of COVID-19 infection within correctional institutions. The DOC has implemented a number of measures to minimize the impact of COVID-19 in Minnesota’s correctional facilities.

Recently implemented measures include increased testing capacity, as reflected in the daily publication of COVID-19 test status and results on the DOC website, and a number of population management strategies. Details of those measures are below. To aid in the prevention and management of COVID-19, DOC aims to continue with increased testing. At present, the agency is focused on increased testing at MCF-Moose Lake and MCF-Willow River.

“As has been noted by Governor Walz, it is only through widespread testing that we can target efforts to protect those most medically vulnerable to COVID-19,” DOC Commissioner Paul Schnell said. “As studies have found, many cases of COVID-19 result in mild to moderate symptoms or even no symptoms at all. Of particular concern is the reality that those with minor symptoms can spread COVID-19 to others.”

Data

As has been experienced in communities around the world, increased testing by the DOC has revealed increased numbers of COVID-19 positive individuals, many of whom are asymptomatic. To date, just two of Minnesota’s 11 correctional facilities have incarcerated people with confirmed cases of COVID-19. Other important data points:

- Of the 212 incarcerated individuals tested for COVID-19, 122 were asymptomatic at the time of the test. Thirty tested positive. Those 30 remain asymptomatic.
- 30 other incarcerated individuals who were confirmed positive or presumed positive have had their symptoms resolve and have returned to the general population.
- One incarcerated person is currently hospitalized with COVID-19 related complications. A second person was hospitalized with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but tested negative.

- All others are isolated and being treated in their facility with mild to moderate symptoms.

The latest data on testing by DOC is updated on the DOC website at 4:00 pm every day:

<https://mn.gov/doc/about/covid-19-updates/>.

Intakes

While new intakes from the courts have slowed, the DOC does continue to receive new admissions to the state's prisons. All new intakes go to two DOC facilities – St. Cloud for men and Shakopee (the only facility for women in Minnesota) for women. All new intakes are screened for COVID-19 symptoms and quarantined for 14 days upon arrival at a DOC facility. The quarantine units are completely self-contained and all activity occurs in the unit. All new intakes are also tested for COVID-19 before being moved into the general population.

To ensure DOC continues to have space for new intake quarantine at MCF-St. Cloud, a limited number of transfers continue to be necessary. Many transfers come from the intake quarantine population. Each person transferred is also quarantined at the new facility for 14 days.

Masks

Cloth barrier masks have been distributed to all DOC staff working in the facilities and all people who are incarcerated. In addition, staff at MCF-Moose Lake and MCF-Willow River have been issued N95s.

Testing protocol

The testing protocol in place for the DOC calls for testing any incarcerated person who:

- Is a new intake, on their twelfth day of quarantine, prior to being placed in general population
- Exhibits symptoms consistent with COVID-19
- Is asymptomatic and on day 12 of 14 of quarantine after having close contact with a person confirmed positive for COVID-19
- Has a first negative result, but medical assessment determines should be retested based on continued symptoms.

To reduce risk to staff and the incarcerated population, we plan to expand the availability of testing for both staff and those incarcerated in our facilities.

COVID-19 work release

We are implementing a temporary policy to expedite release of certain inmates who are already within 90 days of their regularly-scheduled release date. It's a simple expansion of Minnesota's longstanding transitional work release program that will maintain community safety and better protect both staff and those who remain incarcerated.

Work release is an established process with a proven track record of ensuring community safety while helping people who have served time in prison to transition back to being good neighbors and productive members of the community.

We're currently looking at these parameters:

- Within 90 days of their regularly scheduled release date.
- Rated a low or medium risk to re-offend.
- Have an approved place to live in a community-based facility or residence.
- Have access to a landline or have internet access with a camera-capable device at the approved release address.

Enhanced community-based supervision of “technical” release violators

In mid-March we revised our approach to release violations that do not involve allegations of new offenses. We have significantly reduced release revocations for technical violations of release, and are instead focusing on restructured community-based supervision as a response to technical violations.

COVID-19 related conditional medical release

In recognition of the grave health threat posed by COVID-19 for particular people with certain underlying conditions, we have created a new process through which certain adult inmates may apply for conditional medical release. The process is available for those who have a serious medical condition that puts them at higher risk of grave harm from COVID-19.

The commissioner of corrections has long had the authority to place adult inmates on conditional medical release before they have reached their supervised release date if they suffer from a grave medical condition and their release poses no threat to the public. Because COVID-19 presents a new threat to the health of people with particular medical conditions, adult inmates who previously would not have qualified for conditional medical release may qualify now if their underlying medical condition puts them at risk of grave harm from COVID-19. This process will temporarily replace existing DOC policy concerning medical releases related to COVID-19.

“Stay with Unit” plans

We have implemented “Stay with Unit” plans at each facility to ensure incarcerated individuals participate in facility activities, including any programming, yard time, and dining, only with others in their living unit. By providing living unit separation, better social distancing becomes possible and we minimize the potential for widespread outbreaks across entire facilities.

The “Stay with Unit” plans build on significant other measures taken at each facility since early February.

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