

MCF-Moose Lake Implements “Stay with Unit” Plan and Other Measures to Combat Covid-19 (4/8/20)

ST. PAUL, Minn. – Minnesota Correctional Facility (MCF)-Moose Lake has implemented a “Stay with Unit” plan to continue efforts to combat COVID-19 and protect staff and the people incarcerated in the facility. Similar to Governor Walz’s “Stay at Home” order, MCF-Moose Lake’s “Stay with Unit” plan ensures incarcerated individuals participate in facility activities only with others in their living unit. At the direction of Commissioner Paul Schnell, each DOC facility has developed and is implementing “Stay with Unit” plans. At MCF-Moose Lake, the plan is part of a comprehensive approach in place to combat COVID-19.

“Our goal is protect both staff and the people who are incarcerated in our facilities,” Commissioner Schnell said. “The Stay with Unit plans build on measures already implemented to minimize the potential for spread of COVID-19,” Commissioner Schnell said. “By providing living unit separation, better social distancing becomes possible. We protect both staff and offenders, and we reduce the potential for our facilities to add stress to local health care systems.”

The oldest part of the MCF-Moose Lake facility has been in operation since 1938, first operating as a state hospital. The facility has operated as a prison since 1993. It is a complex and complicated environment with different living conventions, including single cells and group cells housing up to eight offenders. The facility has eight general living units and one segregation unit, with a total capacity of 1,075 beds.

Under normal operations, incarcerated people from different living units might be intermingled for certain activities, including in the dining hall, educational programming, or facility industry or work opportunities. With close living quarters in most prisons, this intermingling can allow a virus like COVID-19 to spread quickly, among both staff and offenders.

The approach taken at MCF-Moose Lake recognizes the importance of protecting both staff and offenders to best minimize the impact and spread of COVID-19. Steps taken to protect staff also protect offenders, and steps taken to protect offenders also protect staff.

“We have taken the potential impact of COVID-19 seriously from the beginning,” MCF-Moose Lake Warden Bill Bolin said. “While we wanted to keep COVID-19 out of the facility, we planned for the likelihood that we would have cases here, just like communities have seen around the world. We have taken significant steps to continuously disinfect the facility, ensure proper hygiene, and help staff know how to protect their families when they go home. The ‘Stay with Unit’ plan will help us continue to combat COVID-19 and allow facility activities to be conducted with smaller groups from the same living unit. Our staff are doing everything they can to protect community safety and health.”

To date, MCF-Moose Lake has had eight staff members and nine offenders test positive for COVID-19. The facility has followed Minnesota Department of Health guidance for isolation,

quarantine, and testing from the beginning. Like most cases of COVID-19, these individuals have all experienced mild symptoms and do not require hospitalization.

Working closely with epidemiologists from the Minnesota Department of Health, MCF-Moose Lake has implemented a number of other measures to provide a comprehensive approach to combating COVID-19, including:

Protecting Staff and their Families

MCF-Moose Lake has implemented a number of measures to protect staff and their families. Similar to staff at health care facilities, staff have been provided guidance for steps to take to protect their families while they continue to come to work every day. Information has been distributed and is on posters at the facility for washing hands when they leave work, designating a door of their home just for them to enter and exit, changing clothes and showering when they get home, avoiding sharing food, among other steps.

Hand washing stations

MCF-Moose Lake has installed new hand washing stations in the facility. Four handwashing sinks were installed in the lobby entrance to the facility and one hand washing station was installed at the facility truck gate entrance. All individuals are required to wash their hands when entering and exiting the facility. Two additional handwashing stations for the offender population were placed in the facility's main hallways, along with 57 additional hand sanitizer receptacles installed throughout the facility. Offender restrooms and kitchenettes also have sinks to wash hands. All individuals (staff and offenders) are encouraged to wash their hands frequently throughout the day.

Masks

Cloth barrier masks are being created and distributed to staff and incarcerated people at all DOC facilities. For Moose Lake and Willow River, 1,500 cloth masks have already been distributed. All staff members working at the Moose Lake facility and offenders are required to wear the cloth barrier masks. Each person has been given instructions for how to care for the mask, how to put it on, and how to take it off safely. Moose Lake Health Services staff have N95 masks, and there are a limited number of N95s for corrections officers to use when escorting symptomatic inmates to isolation, or when packing up the property of a symptomatic inmate. DOC follows Minnesota Department of Health guidelines for when and how personal protective equipment is used.

Dining Hall

MCF-Moose Lake continues to provide offenders three hot meals a day. A limited number of offenders from one living unit assist in food preparation in the kitchen, paying particular attention to proper food preparation hygiene and proper protective equipment. Offender dining is taking place with smaller groups of offenders practicing social distancing in Central Dining and also with meals being served in the offender living units using proper protective equipment.

Programming

Distance learning plans and programs are being implemented for education and treatment programs. The timeline for implementation is forthcoming. A limited number of inmates are

working in the kitchen, and important work continues with MINNCOR inmates sewing barrier masks. There is no co-mingling of these inmates, and social distancing and hand washing are strictly enforced.

CDC Step-Down Period after Isolation

The gym is currently being set up as a step-down area for inmates who had COVID-19 symptoms but that have now resolved. Per CDC recommendations, inmates will step down for 7 days in the gym, and then return to general population.

Video Visits and Phone Calls

The department and Jpay video visiting have implemented one free 15-minute video visit per week for loved ones of those who are incarcerated. Additional video visits may be purchased at a reduced rate. Inmates also continue to receive two free 5-minute phone calls per week.

Additional steps taken:

- Created public health education for those incarcerated.
- Waived medical co-pays to encourage those with symptoms to report concerns.
- Screening all employees entering the facility for symptoms and recent travel.
- Identified all incarcerated individuals with known high-risk medical conditions and began implementing alternative living situations where possible.
- Increased communication with and between all DOC wardens and the prison inmate councils.
- Established a resource information page on the website for staff.

DOC provides daily updates about its COVID-19 response on its website:

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