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DOC

HEALTH AND SAFETY REMAIN DOC PRIORITIES AS VISITATION IS SET TO RESUME DEPARTMENT-WIDE

SEPTEMBER 2020

Guided by its core mission to provide secure custody, appropriate care, and meaningful programming for those under its supervision, the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) continues its gradual reopening of day-to-day operations. After months of public health and safety initiatives, the DOC's next phase resumes in-person visitation with appropriate health precautions across all department facilities.

From the first days of the pandemic, the DOC recognized the unique challenges COVID-19 posed to the people living and working in correctional environments. The DOC's strategies minimized opportunities for the virus to enter facilities; identified and treated inmates and staff who contracted the virus; suppressed the virus' spread through enhanced cleaning and sanitizing practices, including the distribution of alcohol-based hand sanitizer; and began easing restrictions safely in early July. These decisions were made by balancing the latest COVID information and the need to provide beneficial programming opportunities for those entrusted to DOC's care.

VISITATION

General, in-person visitation was suspended temporarily in March to protect the health and safety of inmates and staff from COVID-19. In early July, the DOC started the phased resumption of in-person visitation with health and safety precautions at Northeastern Correctional Center and Pondville Correctional Center. Shortly thereafter, four additional minimum/pre-release facilities began receiving in-person visitors. As of September 22, 2020, these facilities have accommodated more than 1,200 visitors.

The DOC will resume in-person visitation across the department on September 28 in a way that balances the benefits of visitation with the need for vigilance against COVID-19. To ensure safety, visitors will answer standard screening questions about their health and have their temperatures taken prior to entering the facility – just as staff and vendors do in order to keep our facilities safe. Visits will be conducted in designated areas, and all individuals will remain in their assigned areas to maintain social distancing. Face coverings will be worn at all times, both by visitors and inmates. Visitors will be required to use hand sanitizer before and after the visiting period, and all visits will be non-contact with a physical barrier between the visitor and inmate.

Visitation guidelines for each facility are contingent upon testing data and positivity rates specific to each site and in the broader community. Like re-opening practices across the Commonwealth, DOC's approach is based on data and may change based on that data. As facilities resume personal visits, visitors may schedule a visit via phone and obtain additional information on the protocols. Personal visits are limited during this phase to one visit per inmate per week, with up to two visitors at a time, and must be scheduled 24 hours in advance. Attorney visits remain ongoing and unaffected by this change.

To further promote connected relationships with families and loved ones, video visitation began in late July and is now operational at Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center, Bridgewater State Hospital and at the Massachusetts Alcohol and Substance Abuse Center. The DOC continues to expand video infrastructure to provide for virtual visitations at other facilities. Additionally, video conferencing for attorneys has been rolled out department-wide with plans in place to further expand the capacity across the DOC within the next 60 days.

COUNSELING & EDUCATION

In line with public health guidance, the DOC has continued progress on the next phase of reopening. Chaplains have returned to facilities on a full time basis where they will continue individual spiritual counseling. Librarians have also returned on a full time basis to create appropriate schedules for the library use department-wide. Program staff have facilitated workbook programs and conducted one-on-one sessions with clients. Teachers have led small, socially distant classroom learning in a hybrid model similar to most communities, where students will be expected to complete independent work outside of class time. College professors are expected to return by the end of the month to conduct socially distant classroom learning at advanced levels.

The DOC staff assess internal movement restrictions on an ongoing basis. If re-opening continues safely, we hope to further relax those restrictions in a way that is responsible, appropriate, and safe for inmates, staff, and the public.

TESTING & PREVENTION



With more than 9,700 COVID-19 tests administered thus far, many DOC inmates have received multiple tests during the pandemic. These tests have bolstered the DOC's ability to make informed, data-driven decisions; ensure that appropriate steps are taken to isolate individuals who are sick; and continue important medical care for inmates who need it. DOC's medical provider, Wellpath, continues to provide COVID-19 testing for symptomatic inmates, their close contacts, and those who are newly admitted. Additionally, strategic mobile testing continues for inmates and staff, and can be scaled to meet the needs of the department.

These protocols have proven effective. Since July 1st, the only new cases of COVID-19 have been among inmates who had contracted the virus prior to their admission into DOC custody, and all four of these inmates were immediately identified and quarantined prior to entering the general population. The Department's testing, screening, and quarantine initiatives continue to safeguard the health of about 6,900 inmates, as well as DOC staff and vendors.

DID YOU
KNOW?

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Online Information

The DOC has made COVID-19 testing reports, an FAQ, and additional online information on reopening steps available at:

<https://www.mass.gov/guides/doc-coronavirus-information-guide>

The pandemic has challenged every person, organization, and community in the Commonwealth to rise to our highest ideals of care and mutual concern. The collaborative teamwork among the DOC staff, our inmate population, and the community at-large has achieved results consistent with those across the Commonwealth. The DOC's commitment to its core mission has guided every decision to heed public health guidance, minimize the virus' impact, and continually strengthen public safety in the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts.