

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

February 1, 2024

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair
Representative Kevin McCabe, Vice Chair
Representative Tom McKay
Representative Justin Ruffridge
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Representative Donna Mears

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Thomas Baker

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S) : DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JEN WINKELMAN, Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Corrections
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint on the Department of Corrections.

APRIL WILKERSON, Deputy Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Corrections
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the presentation on the Department of Corrections.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:30 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives McKay, Himschoot, Mears, McCabe, and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representative Ruffridge arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION(S): Department of Corrections

[8:03:46 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that the only order of business would be a presentation by the Department of Corrections.

[8:04:48 AM](#)

JEN WINKELMAN, Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Corrections, presented a PowerPoint on the Department of Corrections (DOC) [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She shared the department's mission and core services, as well as figures on staffing and offenders. As of January 1, 2024, DOC was responsible for 10,782 individuals. She gave an overview of the department's organizational structure, noting that there is over 130 years of Alaska DOC experience within the executive team, and detailed the Division of Institutions. She indicated that all of DOC's facilities are below capacity, which was an intentional effort to contribute to both staff and inmate wellness and safer facilities as a whole. In response to a committee question, she acknowledged that the facilities in Juneau and Ketchikan are running close to capacity, which is combatted by transferring inmates out regularly. She deferred to Deputy Commissioner Wilkerson for an update on the Lemon Creek construction project.

[8:13:56 AM](#)

APRIL WILKERSON, Deputy Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Corrections (DOC), reported that the project was on schedule and a contract had been awarded to the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF). Demolition is expected to begin by March with full construction in place by the end of March [2024]. In response to a question from the committee, she anticipated that construction would be completed by the end of the calendar year [2024] and full occupancy within the following three months.

[8:19:23 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN resumed the presentation and shared the prison population by gender. She noted that the unsentenced population continues to exceed the sentenced population with the female unsentenced population nearly doubling that of those sentenced. She highlighted the unique challenges of a large unsentenced population, which she described as "transient," including programming and behavioral issues. The bulk of the sentenced population - nearly 30 percent - were incarcerated for a registerable sex offense. She detailed the Division of Health and Rehabilitation Services, noting that DOC is the largest behavioral health provider in the state.

[8:26:02 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN, in response to a series of committee questions, said providing more aftercare options for release would produce better outcomes; vocational and educational opportunities were expanding to include welding, barbering, commercial driver's license (CDL), and carpentry; the dialysis clinic within Goose Creek was a cost-saving measure, but it was negated by a substantial increase in medical costs; less than 10 inmates work at the fish processing plant for a considerably larger wage than that of the jobs within the facilities.

[8:35:19 AM](#)

MS. WILKERSON, in response to committee questions, replied that inmate stipends are low, ranging from \$0.25 to \$1.90 per hour; wages are currently under review to increase the stipend.

[8:36:57 AM](#)

MS. WINKELMAN, in response to further committee questions, explained that the transient unsentenced population may contribute to the work participation rate; the size of the unsentenced population may be compounded by the courts' backlog, complicated cases, and behavioral health needs; Alaska is one of six states with an integrated prison system; the polygraph test is a treatment tool to target programming for sex offenders.

[8:41:34 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN continued the presentation by discussing the Division of Pretrial, Probation, and Parole. The division oversees the victim service unit, pretrial services, statewide probation and parole, and 15 regional and community jails. She

noted that following intent language passed by the legislature in 2023, the division, in partner with various municipal leaders, updated contracts and standards that had been in place since 1994. The Board of Parole is administratively housed within DOC with the two primary functions of hearings and violations.

[8:49:18 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN, in response to a committee question, described the process for inmates releasing under supervision.

[8:52:19 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN continued the presentation by detailing the Division of Administrative Services, which oversees administrative services, information technology, research and records, and facilities capital improvement unit and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) compliance. She outlined the Office of the Commissioner, which houses the commissioner's office, recruitment and retention, and the training academy. She touted the wellness unit within the commissioner's office to encourage healthy staff. She addressed recruitment and retention challenges, noting the incentive programs created for moving staff around. Temporary housing was increased to 120 days due to an agreement with the Department of Administration (DOA) to alleviate housing concerns in areas facing recruitment difficulties.

[9:00:30 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN, in response to committee questions, explained that background checks would prevent former prisoners from holding many positions within areas of DOC facilities; however, program support positions were established for this purpose.

[9:01:54 AM](#)

MS. WILKERSON, in response to a series of committee questions, said correctional officers' salary in Bethel is competitive; DOA is performing a statewide salary study; a 2009 salary study showed that after five to six years of employment, State of Alaska salary and benefit packages are higher than the private sector.

[9:04:56 AM](#)

MS. WINKELMAN concluded the presentation by sharing her goals and objectives, which included the health and wellbeing of staff; inmates, defendants and probationer/parolees leaving better than when they entered the system; and identifying efficiencies and resources to reduce recidivism. She suggested several technological upgrades that would help automate the system, such as the use of tablets for requests for information and video conferencing for court hearings. She reported that there had been four inmate deaths since January 2024, and discussed the institutional response and internal review team.

[9:15:24 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER WINKELMAN, in response to committee questions, explained that mail is photocopied before distribution to prevent the entry of contraband. She expressed her hope that in the future, tablets could be utilized to help address these challenges.

[9:23:29 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:23 a.m.