

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

February 13, 2025

3:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Scott Kawasaki, Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman, Vice Chair
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Robert Yundt

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S) : DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS OVERVIEW

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview by the Department of Corrections.

JAKE WYCKOFF, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Corrections
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview by the Department of Corrections.

ZANE NIGHSWONGER, Director
Division of Institutions
Department of Corrections
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview by the Department of Corrections.

SIDNEY WOOD, Deputy Director
Division of Institutions
Department of Corrections
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions regarding Department of Corrections processes.

TRAVIS WELCH, Director
Division of Health and Rehabilitation Services
Department of Corrections
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview by the Department of Corrections.

KELCEY WALLENDER, Parole Administrator
Parole Board
Department of Corrections
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview by the Department of Corrections.

KEVIN WORLEY, Director
Division of Administrative Services
Department of Corrections
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview by the Department of Corrections.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:32:18 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:32 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Wielechowski, Gray-Jackson, and Chair Kawasaki. Senator Bjorkman arrived thereafter.

PRESENTATION(S): DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS OVERVIEW

[3:33:00 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI announced an overview by the Department of Corrections.

[3:33:44 PM](#)

APRIL WILKERSON, Deputy Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Corrections, Juneau, Alaska, moved to slide 2 and began the overview of the department. She stated that the Department of Corrections was established in 1984 after separating from Health and Social Services. She said now the Department has four divisions and a parole board. Its FY26 budget includes 2,124 full-time positions and over \$481 million. The mission, based on the Alaska Constitution, is to provide secure confinement and public safety. She said each division's roles align with the department's core services shown on the chart.

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JAKE WYCKOFF, Deputy Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Corrections (DOC), Anchorage, Alaska, moved to slide 3, Core Services. He stated that the Department of Corrections provides core services to enhance community safety, these include secure confinement, supervised release, and reformative programs. First, Secure confinement operates 13 correctional facilities across Alaska and 14 community jails in areas without state facilities. He said population management includes furloughs, electronic monitoring, and inmate transport in coordination with Public Safety. He said health care, rehabilitation, and training are also provided, including a full correctional academy and support for municipal jail training. Next, the supervised release service covers statewide probation, pretrial, and parole services, with oversight of halfway houses. Last, reformative programs offer education, vocational training, substance abuse and sex offender treatment, faith-based support, and reentry services.

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MR. WYCKOFF moved to slide 4, Department of Corrections at a Glance. He spoke about the following:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Alaska is one of seven states that operate a unified correctional system. A state unified system is one in which there is an integrated state-level prison and jail system.
- DOC booked 26,998 offenders into its facilities in FY2024.
 - 16,868 were unique offenders
 - 567 were non-criminal Title 47 bookings
- As of January 1, 2025, DOC was responsible for 9,767 individuals.

- 4,266 offenders in jail or prison
- 250 offenders on sentenced electronic monitoring (EM)
- 364 offenders in community residential centers (CRCs)
- 3,382 offenders on probation or parole
- 1,505 defendants on pretrial supervision (1,029 on pretrial EM)

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MS. WILKERSON moved to slide 5 and talked about the overall structure outline of DOC's executive team and department structure. She said the Board of Parole is administratively housed in the Department of Corrections but operates independently, reporting to the Governor. Its members are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Legislature.

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MS. WILKERSON moved to slide 6, FY2024 Major Accomplishments. She spoke about the following:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Partnered with the Department of Family and Community Services and Alaska Psychiatric Institute to establish and open the jail-based restoration program at the Anchorage Correctional Complex.
- Initiated the expansion of community placement options by using alternatives to the traditional community residential center placements. The department is running a pilot project on these placements, utilizing True North Recovery and Alaska Addiction and Rehabilitation Services (AARS).
- Utilized the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) resource guide to complete a thorough proactive needs assessment of all 13 correctional facilities statewide. The finalized report and recommendation are part of Project 2025, an effort to reduce in-custody annual suicides rates 20 percent by Calendar Year (CY) 2025.

- Partnered with the Carpenter's Union and implemented a pre-apprentice carpentry program at Hiland Mountain and Wildwood Correctional Centers.
- Implemented a pilot tablet program at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center. These tablets are used in a limited/restricted capacity for: Digital Law Library, Attorney Visitation, Court hearings, and the inmate handbook. In addition, the department and the Alaska Court System partnered to have Court tablets operational for inmates at Goose Creek Correctional Center.
- Under the department's statewide Wellness Program for employees and inmates, formalized a Critical Incident Stress Management/Peer Support team. The department trained 35 staff to be peer supporters and will be training additional supporters in early 2025. The Wellness Unit trained 54 Stronger Families trainers and implemented seven modules department wide. Approximately 1,000 department staff were trained in this program.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether individuals would retain access to the physical law library in addition to using tablets for digital access.

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MS. WILKERSON answered that DOC is not replacing physical books or library. She stated that DOC is adding technology as an option to improve efficiency and ease the workload.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether inmates using an iPad or similar technology have the ability to save, store, or print documents.

MS. WILKERSON answered yes, they have individual accounts. While some decline, most individuals participate. These accounts allow the inmates to save and receive documents, like parole packets, and the account follows them if they transfer facilities.

CHAIR KAWASAKI stated that according to slide 6 the DOC worked with the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) and Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) on a jail-based restoration program. He asked if these individuals are part of DOC or part of API.

MS. WILKERSON answered that the individuals are part of API and DOC. She said the director of Health and Rehabilitation Services (HARS) can answer that question in more detail.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI announced Senator Bjorkman joined the meeting some time ago.

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MS. WILKERSON moved to slide 7, Key Challenges. She stated that recruiting and keeping qualified staff remains a major challenge, but DOC has made strong progress. Statewide correctional officer vacancies dropped from over 17 percent to under 5 percent, with some locations down from nearly 40 percent to 22 percent, and others holding steady at zero percent vacancy. She stated her belief that recruitment is improving, allowing the department to now focus on retention. She said the DOC is working to improve community placements, though ensuring proper support remains difficult. Health care costs continue to rise, as DOC is the state's largest mental health provider, and the population is aging. A new chief medical officer is exploring cost-saving changes. Finally, DOC facilities are aging. The department is working to keep up with maintenance and update technology systems to maintain safety.

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ZANE NIGHSWONGER, Director, Division of Institutions, Department of Corrections, Anchorage, Alaska, and moved to slide 8, Division of Institutions. He stated that the Division of Institutions oversees secure confinement focused on public safety and rehabilitation for community reintegration. The division manages 13 facilities statewide, including those in Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley, along with halfway houses, chaplaincy, and electronic monitoring for sentenced individuals. He said the division also handles inmate transportation, including nearly 6,848 medical trips in FY24—over 600 more than last year. Currently, six individuals are housed out of state due to safety concerns, not medical needs.

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MR. NIGHSWONGER moved to slide 9, Facility Capacity. He said the chart visually displays the capacity of facilities at the start of the 2025. He emphasized that institutional capacity is now below maximum at all facilities, thanks to efforts like transferring inmates between locations and increasing community placements. This has eased overcrowding, improving both inmate

and staff wellbeing. In the past, overflow led to bunks in gyms and hobby areas.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked about the trend in prison population over the past 5 to 10 years.

[3:59:06 PM](#)

MR. NIGHSWONGER responded that after House Bill 49 passed in 2019, Alaska's prison population began to rise, and DOC expected to exceed capacity by 2026. He stated that COVID slowed that growth. He said some facilities like Lemon Creek showed reduced capacity due to repairs, and a few units at Spring Creek are offline because of staffing. The DOC is using the downtime for maintenance. Overall, growth hasn't matched projections, and future trends remain uncertain.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if Mr. Nighswonger knew the cause of the decline in the trend.

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MR. WYCKOFF answered that it's a complex scenario but once DOC reopened the Palmer correctional Center, that added 500 beds, increased capacity, and thereby lowered population percentages.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that its good news the state of Alaska is no longer overpopulated. He asked that he receive a 10 year look back of the prison population analysis.

[4:04:00 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked which of the facilities are maximum security facilities.

[4:04:08 PM](#)

MR. NIGHSWONGER answered that the DOC has a couple maximum security facilities. He said one is the Spring Creek Correctional Center in Seward and the other is in Juneau.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN asked Mr. Nighswonger to explain how the pretrial ankle monitoring program works and whether its practices have changed in recent years.

[4:05:02 PM](#)

MR. NIGHSWONGER responded that he's not over pretrial, but staff can answer the question later in the presentation.

[4:05:30 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked why so many individuals are not sentenced but still in the facility.

[4:06:14 PM](#)

MR. NIGHSWONGER continued with slide 9. He clarified that even though the chart shows 84 percent of general capacity that doesn't mean 16 percent of the beds are open. Factors like mental health needs, custody levels, and gender-specific housing reduce usable bed space.

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MR. NIGHSWONGER moved to slide 10, Prison Population by Gender. He said these charts show sentenced vs. unsentenced populations by gender. He stated that unsentenced males are starting to decline, possibly due to reduced backlogs and overall population drop. He stated the unsentenced population is about 45 percent and the sentenced is 55 percent. Just last year the numbers were reversed. He pointed out a situation in Goose Creek Correctional Center, that's mainly a sentenced facility, but the DOC had to use it for overflow. At one point the center was half sentenced and half unsentenced. The DOC was fortunate that Goose Creek had all the resources at the center for the inmates. He stated that the number of unsentenced population at Goose Creek is dropping but when there is an overpopulation of unsentenced population it causes challenges.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI referred to slide 10 and if the numbers represent institutions only, not halfway houses or community residential centers (CRC), how many eligible unsentenced individuals choose not to be released to a lower level of confinement.

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MR. NIGHSWONGER answered that the unsentenced population usually remains in the facility unless released on pretrial. DOC has a confined felon program through some CRCs, but only a small number are housed at that level.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if there is data to show the average amount of time an unsentenced person spends in custody and how many of the unsentenced people are found not guilty and never receive prison sentence.

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MR. NIGHSWONGER directed the questions to MR. Wood.

[4:11:21 PM](#)

SIDNEY WOOD, Deputy Director, Division of Institutions, Department of Corrections, Wasilla, Alaska, answered questions regarding department processes. He said he doesn't have an exact number for the first question but its less than two weeks and the second question is more complex. He stated that if a person is later found not guilty or never sentenced, the final outcomes are not tracked.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how many in the unsentenced population are eligible for bail but remain in jail due to inability to pay.

MR. WOOD responded that the DOC looked at the data to find a bail amount that might be a tipping point but couldn't identify one. He said even people with low bail often stayed in jail—usually due to lack of funds or other complicating charges. There wasn't a clear link between bail amount and jail time, aside from felony bail being generally higher.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked what the top few reasons are why people are unsentenced but remain in jail.

MR. WOOD answered that often people have bail conditions or additional charges—like a parole violation—which aren't bailable. He said there are many reasons for not posting bail. He does not have a top five list.

[4:15:23 PM](#)

MR. NIGHSWONGER moved to slide 11, Sentenced and Unsented Population by Offense Class. He stated that the chart is broken down from the previous slide's custody population by crime type—split between sentenced (convicted) and unsentenced (charged). Many have multiple charges, but these charts show only the most serious charge. He stated that most are in for crimes against a person or sex offenses, which together make up nearly 75 percent of the sentenced population.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI stated that over 10-12 percent of the sentenced population is in for probation or parole violations. He asked if Mr. Nighswonger could explain and are these in addition to their original sentence.

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MR. NIGHSWONGER answered yes, in addition to the original sentence.

[4:17:05 PM](#)

TRAVIS WELCH, Director, Division of Health and Rehabilitation Services, Department of Corrections, Anchorage, Alaska, and introduced himself to the committee.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI restated his question from slide 6. He asked how the jail-based restoration program works with the Anchorage Correctional Complex (ACC).

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MR. WELCH responded that HARS currently partners with the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) on a 10-bed restoration outpatient program operating under AS 12. The restoration program is based at ACC in the sub-acute psych unit. He stated that API professionals come in twice a week to provide services to participants in state custody and care. A similar program exists at Hiland Mountain for female inmates under Title 12.

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MR. WELCH moved to slide 12, Division of Health and Rehabilitation Services. He stated that the Division of Health and Rehabilitation Services must provide essential care to prevent health decline while in custody. Inmates get a health screening on arrival, checking for physical issues, mental illness, withdrawal risk, and suicidality. He stated that HARS runs Alaska's largest mental health system, with 313 inpatient psychiatric beds across seven facilities—far more than API's 80 beds. HARS also offers substance use treatment for about 1,200 inmates, with 280 program slots, and partners with outside providers for additional care. He said that infirmaries at three prisons offer hospital-level care, and all facilities have clinics for outpatient needs. Goose Creek also serves Point Macenzie.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked what is the follow up process for prisoners receiving medical care at the time of release.

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MR. WELCH responded that for the population releasing, especially those with serious health needs, HARS has a medical social worker unit that coordinates with outside providers to plan care and secure placements, like inpatient beds if needed.

Institutional probation officers and the HARS reentry unit also work with partners, including reentry coalitions, to connect individuals with services before they leave custody.

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MR. WELCH continued with slide 12. He stated that the DOC offers Assess, Plan, Identify, Coordinate (APIC) and Institutional Discharge Planning (IDP) plus for individuals with severe mental illness. APIC supports those not on probation, helping connect them to housing, Medicaid, food, and services upon release. IDP Plus is similar but for those on probation, adding support through probation officers. He said the HARS Reentry, Education, and Vocational Services (REVS) program coordinates with facilities and partners to connect people to services before release. The program offers basic education, ESL, and GED prep/testing. He said on the vocational side, HARS has launched a pilot pre-apprenticeship with the Carpenters Union at Wildwood and Hiland Mountain, preparing individuals for skilled jobs after release. The goal is to support successful reentry and economic participation.

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MS. WILKERSON stated that the Division of Pretrial, Probation, and Parole was formed in 2019 by merging pretrial services with the former standalone probation and parole division, reducing costs by consolidating administration. She said pretrial services was stood up under Senate Bill 91 and maintained under House Bill 49. These units supervise individuals released under court conditions and provide assessments and electronic monitoring. She stated that often confusion arises because "pretrial" is used both in institutions and in community supervision, though they are separate functions. She stated that probation and parole operate in 13 regions, providing presentence reports and managing the interstate compact, which supervises offenders moving between states. They also include a victim's unit, which runs the VINE system. She said the division oversees contracts and standards for 14 community jails. After Seward's jail closure, Spring Creek took over male bookings, with females and youth transferred to Wildwood. She said community jail standards were updated in January and take effect July 1. She stated that the pretrial electronic monitoring program hasn't changed since it's been stood up. She said individuals can choose between a private vendor or DOC for monitoring.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked why an offender would choose DOC over a private contractor for electronic monitoring.

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MS. WILKERSON answered that the DOC is no cost to the offender while a private vendor will charge to be on their program. She said there are offenders that will flip flop and choose a private vendor, violate, go to court then go to DOC, violate and go back to court. Either way, its up to the offender which program they want to be a part of.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN commented on the concern he has about people being released then violating their parole. He asked to what extent can DOC work with law enforcement to reduce how often this is happening.

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MS. WILKERSON answered that the DOC believes better communication and continued training with the courts is key—especially to ensure DOC pretrial officers' assessments and release recommendations are appropriate for individuals being released back into the community.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN commented that it's important to consider the need to protect the community from individuals in active addiction who are highly likely to reoffend and continue being released. He stated that this concern is also coming from troopers, prosecutors, and public defenders. He suggested DOC and law enforcement should collaborate more to identify these individuals and ensure they aren't placed on monitoring when they pose a public risk.

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MS. WILKERSON stated her belief that the DOC agrees. The DOC is currently reevaluating the risk assessment tool, hoping to be completed by July 1st. She said the DOC is also working with an external partner to review the entire pretrial program—looking at whether it's functioning as intended and if DOC is effectively collaborating with other law enforcement agencies, the courts, and the public defender's office as originally envisioned.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI commented that the sentenced population in parole is now down to about 12 percent, which is lower than in past

years when it's been higher in violating conditions of release. He stated his belief that there is a difference between technical violations and more serious violations. He stated that he understands Senator Bjorkman's concern to ensure public safety, especially when some individuals reoffend even before their cases are fully resolved.

[4:39:01 PM](#)

KELCEY WALLENDER, Parole Administrator, Parole Board, Department of Corrections, Anchorage, Alaska, and moved to slide 14, Board of Parole. She stated that the Board of Parole is part of the Department of Corrections. Board of Parole's main roles are reviewing early release applications and handling parole violations, like how courts handle probation violations. Parole types include discretionary, special medical, geriatric (early release), and mandatory (required by law). She said the Board works statewide with DOC staff. It has five members, appointed by the governor and confirmed by the legislature, with staggered five-year terms—three represent judicial districts and two serve at-large.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether she could share how many people were released on discretionary parole and how many applications were submitted last year.

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MS. WALLENDER answered that in the 2024 calendar year the board received 181 discretionary parole applications, and the grant rate was 34 percent, 7 percent were continued and 59 percent were denied.

[4:42:25 PM](#)

KEVIN WORLEY, Director, Division of Administrative Services, Department of Corrections, Juneau, Alaska, and moved to slide 15, Division of Administrative Services. He stated that the Division of Administrative Services handles more than finance and budgeting. They manage the Alaska Corrections Offender Management (ACOM) system, conduct audits and internal controls, oversee inmate banking, and manage facility capital projects. He said they also house the research and records section, which produces reports like the annual offender profile.

[4:45:02 PM](#)

MS. WILKERSON moved to slide 16, Office of the Commissioner. She stated that a missing item from the slide is the separation of the employee wellness program. The commissioner's office is

asking for the wellness program to become its own allocation within the budget. The Commissioner wants to prioritize employee wellness, training academy, recruitment, and retention. She stated that the budget oversight was moved from Administrative Services to the Commissioner's office for better focus on the \$480 million budget.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN if raising the hourly wage inmates earn for prison work holds value in increasing their motivation and engagement.

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MS. WILKERSON answered that about a year and a half ago, the commissioner's office wanted to update inmate stipends by July 1st last year. The office conducted extensive research but paused it midway through fiscal FY2024 due to other priorities. The DOC is reevaluating and hope to finalize an update by July 1st.

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what the hourly rate is for inmate stipends.

MS. WILKERSON answered that the hourly wage is anywhere from 20 cents to a dollar. The inmates working on the maintenance crew could receive \$1.50 to \$2.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI stated his belief that some people might balk at releasing an inmate wage study from the DOC before the state publicly publishes its employee wage study.

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MS. WILKERSON moved to slide 17, Positions by Category. She explained the graph and the gap between budgeted and filled positions. She stated that the medical and mental health numbers look overfilled because they include on-call staff. She said DOC is moving in the right direction but need to keep prioritizing retention. A recent change separated pretrial officers from adult probation officers, which the DOC hopes it helps address staffing gaps.

[4:49:41 PM](#)

MS. WILKERSON moved to slide 18, Goals and Objectives. She stated that the goals and objectives listed are required. The Commissioner asks all leadership what they are doing to support her top priority of staff health and well-being. She said the

belief of the commissioner is simple: if the leadership takes care of their staff, they'll better care for individuals in custody. She said this mind set improves supervision, helps the DOC better allocate resources, and ultimately reduces recidivism. It's a cycle where well-being leads to better outcomes across the system.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for the recidivism rate.

[4:51:00 PM](#)

MS. WILKERSON answered that the recidivism rate is around 54.56 percent.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked if the 54.56 percent is tied to a specific time sequence after one year or 3 years.

[4:51:26 PM](#)

MS. WILKERSON responded that the 54.56 percent recidivism rate is measured over a three-year period and is currently on a downward trend. The DOC is monitoring the recidivism rate closely because during the COVID pandemic, many rehabilitation and reentry programs were temporally suspended. Over the next year or two, DOC will be able to better assess whether that disruption had a lasting impact on outcomes.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI said his office and other members offices have gotten calls from inmates currently in the system through Securus and have heard inmates get to make 4 calls a week. He asked how the call system works, how are phone numbers obtained, and are inmates allowed to make calls to legislative offices or legal counsel.

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MS. WILKERSON answered that the DOC is in contract with Securus for inmate phone services and ensure certain calls remain free—such as to legislators, the ombudsman, public defenders, and private attorneys. Legislators can choose to block or allow these calls and if you're ever prompted to pay, let the DOC know so the department can add your number to the free-call list. She stated that during COVID, the DOC provided four free calls per week due to suspended visitation. She said a 2024 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) order changed communication rules, eliminating commissions, the department used to fund those four calls. As of January 1, each inmate now receives two

free (agency-paid) calls per month. She said the DOC also had to split out security-related services—like recording and biometrics—into a separate contract.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON stated that her office receives quite a few letters from inmates. She said she would write back but eventually her office started coordinating with the Ombudsman's Office to manage the letters. She asked if there are other recommended ways to handle inmate correspondence beyond referring them to the Ombudsman.

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MS. WILKERSON answered that the DOC is happy to coordinate and respond to the letters. She said all legislators need to do is forward letters to DOC, then the DOC will reply and send the response back to the legislator's office.

[4:57:34 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, CHAIR KAWASAKI adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 4:57 p.m.