

Physical Plant Division: Supporting Immediate Needs While Planning for the Future

Diesel mechanic shop construction at Parnall Correctional Facility

Correctional facilities operate as miniature cities. Like cities, infrastructure is incredibly important and serves as the bedrock upon which everything else operates. Without secure perimeters, operational heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, and effective wastewater systems, nothing could function. In the MDOC those responsibilities, and many more, fall under the purview of the Physical Plant Division and facility maintenance. The Public Information Office recently sat down with Physical Plant Division Administrator Gene Page and Construction Projects Manager Trever LeBarre to discuss the Division, its responsibilities, and some of their recent projects.

"I started in construction management 40 years ago," said Page. His career has spanned the private sector and then with the state of Michigan, where he worked for DTMB's Design and Construction Division for 20 years. When now-retired Physical Plant Division Administrator Ed Vallad asked Page to come and work on his team in 2013, Page took up the offer, working his way up to the Division's Administrator, a position he assumed in February 2023.

"I started with the Department of Corrections in 1999 as an officer," said LeBarre. "I had an engineering degree […]. I was told at the time it was an easier way to transfer over to work for DEQ—that was my goal to begin with." He rotated through a few custody positions and then spent time with Michigan State Industries as an engineering specialist. He eventually joined the Physical Plant division in 2013 as a Project Manager.

Division Structure

The Physical Plant Division is structured within the MDOC's Budget and Operations Administration (BOA) at Central Office in Lansing. There, 24 staff make up the team, which includes fire safety inspectors and supervisors, regulation agents, and environmental sanitarians—all of which are led by Environmental Health Manager Gene Wood—as well as building construction specialists led by LeBarre, and staff.

The Physical Plant Division's administrative team is housed in Lansing. However, its work extends to facilities across the state. Each facility has its own maintenance staff made up of a crew of various disciplines that are led by a Physical Plant Supervisor. Facilities staff at the MDOC's prisons number just under 400 across the state. Page and LeBarre work with Jeff Niemi and Dave Albrecht, the CFA Physical Plant Administrators for the Northern and Southern Regional Offices, who assist facilities with higher level maintenance projects. "We're split up into those two regions and we're Central Office…We cover all the construction projects at both, and we give guidance to crews at all 26 facilities," Page explained. LeBarre noted that the Physical Plant Division is responsible for creating the physical plant operations plan, off which all facilities base their physical plant maintenance manuals which deal with preventative and emergency maintenance.

Physical Plant Responsibilities

"Preventative maintenance is the big keyword at each of these facilities. That's their main responsibility," said Page. This involves HVAC, water, sewer, and roofing, among many others. Each facility's maintenance team is the first line of defense to make repairs if there are leaks, mechanical issues, or other needs. Page and LeBarre become involved if issues are too extensive for

the facility's team to handle alone. LeBarre and his unit also perform site reviews, which allow the Physical Plant Division to ensure that various codes and requirements are met. "Trever and his team look over every single facility and make sure that they are running well, being maintained correctly, and preventative maintenance is being done right," Page noted. Ensuring that the MDOC's Physical Plant is secure, safe, and up to code is a constant job. "Trever and I and our Physical Plant Supervisors are 24/7/365," said Page.

The Physical Plant Division also takes the lead when it comes to security and ensuring that the MDOC has the latest and most up-to-date technology and detection, including being responsible for researching and testing new security systems. "We have to pilot and test and then get approval before we can implement and create a new standard. So, Gene and I create the standards for all of these, like our perimeter fences, the sally port, all the security around them, how everything is constructed," said LeBarre. "If a prisoner tries to escape, we want to stop them, we want to catch them, and we provide the expertise with state-of-the-art elaborate camera systems. If they touch the fence, we know where they touched," added Page.

Capital Outlay Projects

What really excites Page and LeBarre are the large-scale projects they oversee that help to ensure the MDOC's future, like Green Oaks Training and Development Center. The center has been undergoing extensive renovations and upgrades amounting to over 54,000 square feet, including constructing additional classrooms, academic offices, creating a new main entrance lobby, a cafeteria, gym, auditorium, and construction of a new gun range. "Green Oaks Training Facility is a fantastic, beautiful state of the art facility," noted Page. "What we want to say to the new potential people that would like to come work for Corrections, is 'Welcome, you mean a lot to us, and we have built this state-of-the-art facility with the best technology for teaching.'" As part of the project, a new three story 50,000 square foot lodging facility is also being constructed adjacent to the training center allowing for overnight stays. The MDOC also is preparing to construct a new training academy for the Northern Region as well, which will be like Green Oaks, but on a smaller scale.

Other projects Page and LeBarre oversee include construction of the MDOC's Vocational Village sites like the new diesel technology training program center at the Parnall Correctional Facility, which LeBarre is in the middle of leading. The project includes renovations and additions totaling over 18,000 square feet, which includes remodeling the facility's old radio shop into a heavy diesel technology program and the construction of an addition to provide space for semi-trucks and semi-trailers for the program's students to work on. This program will provide incarcerated individuals the skills to work on diesel equipment and mechanics, preparing them with highly sought after skills that employers will seek out upon, or even before, their release.



Inside the diesel mechanic shop being built at Parnall Correctional Facility

Looking to the Future

The MDOC's facilities are utilized 24/7, 365 days a year and with that comes increasing upkeep and dockets of preventative maintenance that is required for the Department to continue to work towards its mission. "We have some huge challenges […]. We are in the midst of trying to replace worn out equipment before disasters occur," Page said. This includes HVAC equipment across the state, replacing perimeter drives, and cell door lock control upkeep. Of the list, LeBarre noted, "It's the most projects that we've ever had at one time in the history of the Department of Corrections."

The Physical Plant Division's responsibilities are multi-faceted, from assisting with preventative maintenance at each correctional facility, to keeping abreast of safety and security needs, to planning and coordinating longer-term projects. Page and LeBarre, along with their teams, work diligently to keep everything running like a well-oiled machine. Even with all the current and future work on their plates, the team is optimistic and excited to discuss their work. Their passion for what they do is obvious. When asked how he was feeling at the moment about his job and responsibilities, Page noted, "It's a dream job for me. I love it."



Construction of the Green Oaks Lodging Facility