

Michigan Department of Corrections Response to the April 9, 2024 Family Advisory Board Public Meeting.

Visiting

Visiting Length/Frequency

During the meeting, one of the most discussed topics was the shift to scheduled visits and the use of two-hour visiting blocks. Concerns included a reduction in the overall number of visits, a reduction in the total hours of potential visiting per month as compared to before 2020, issues related to scheduling, visiting room utilization, and the overall “value” of visits, particularly when they require significant travel to reach the facility.

MDOC Response – The Department continues to review the impact of changes to the current visiting schedule, with the goal of balancing access to visits with the duration and quality of visits. At several facilities, current visiting slots are full or nearly full during weekend days, since the limitation on weekend visits has been eliminated. Extending the length of visits would likely result in fewer unique visits occurring at several sites on weekends, which may cause frustration for families and would be counterproductive to the goal of having as many unique individuals participate in visits as possible each month. The Department will be maintaining pre-scheduled visits, but the MDOC will continue to explore changes to visiting schedules based on current visiting demand and participation around the state.

Visiting Application Process

During the meeting, there were a variety of concerns raised about the visitor application process, including the lack of an online application option, inconsistent communication regarding the status of applications, lack of established timelines for processing applications, prohibitions on certain visits involving children, the definition of “immediate family member” for visits, and denials for certain applications with limited justification shared with the applicant.

MDOC Response:

Online Application Processes - The MDOC has begun the development of an online application option for visitor applications. Mailed applications will also still be accepted, but the online process will help create a record of each application that is submitted, so that the Department can track processing times and provide status updates to applicants. Work on adding this function to the MDOC’s website has started, but as it will require configuration and testing, we cannot provide an expected “go live” date yet. Additional information will be shared as online applications become available for the public to use.

Visiting Application Denials - The Department will be updating several aspects of the visiting policy prior to the end of the year. One of these changes will be clarifying that individuals with a past felony record, but who have not been previously incarcerated with the MDOC, will not automatically be prohibited from visiting within the MDOC. Individual applicants will still be reviewed by the respective facility to determine if visiting could pose a threat to the safety and operation of the facility.

Visits by Unrelated Minor Children – While the Department reviewed this request, the policy will not be changed to allow minor children who are not legally related to visit in the prison for safety and liability reasons. Applications for minor children will still require documentation to establish a legal relationship to the incarcerated person.

Definition of “Immediate Family Member” for Visits – The definition of Immediate Family Member for visiting is established by Michigan Administrative Rule R 791.6609, not MDOC policy. As a result, a change in the list of individuals considered “Immediate Family” is not being made at this time. Non-immediate family members may still visit in MDOC facilities but are subject to the limitation on 10 non-immediate family members who can be on the approved visiting list at any time.

In-Person Visiting Experience

During the meeting, several concerns were raised about the in-person visiting experience. These concerns included, but were not limited to, slow or inconsistent processing to start visits, visits scheduled at times with high levels of non-visiting gate traffic, lack of consistent vending services, lack of visiting room supplies, the cost of visiting room photos, and the sharing of personally identifiable information in a public setting. While visiting room comment cards will remain available at all facilities, the MDOC will also be launching a new email address that will allow families and others to provide direct feedback on the visiting experience to the Correctional Facilities Administration. The new email will be MDOC-VisitingConcerns@Michigan.gov.

MDOC Responses:

Slow or Inconsistent Processing Times – Each facility has been asked to monitor visitor processing times to ensure that visitors are processed in a fashion that allows for the expected visiting duration to occur. Facilities will also review their visiting schedules to eliminate avoidable conflicts with other gate traffic such as staff shift changes and will explore staggered visit start times to avoid long waits for processing. A review of visiting processing, start, and end times will be conducted to track performance.

Lack of Consistent Vending Services – The MDOC has signed a statewide contract for vending services for all visiting rooms. This will ensure all facilities have vending services, will allow for a single payment/card system that will work across all sites, and will allow for greater oversight via a single contract. The transition to the new contractor has begun and while it is causing short-term disruptions to visitor room vending currently, vending services will be in place at most prisons this fall, which will provide a more consistent visiting experience across all facilities.

Lack of Visiting Room Supplies (photo tickets, photo printers, plates, etc.) – A visiting room supply checklist is being created and will be used by all facilities to ensure supplies are available to support visits. This checklist will be the responsibility of an assigned employee at each facility. Concerns about a lack of specific supplies can be shared with designated staff or by using the visitor comment cards, which are reviewed by Central Office and the Family Advisory Board, or by emailing MDOC-VisitingConcerns@Michigan.gov.

Sharing of Personally Identifiable Information – Visitor sign in forms will be updated at the facilities to no longer include sensitive information, such as addresses or phone numbers. This information will be collected and retained in the MDOC's information management system as part of the visitor application process but will not be viewable by other members of the public. Visitors remain responsible for notifying staff of any relevant changes in contact information.

Price of Visiting Room Photos – All facilities were surveyed and prices for visiting room photos range between \$1.50 and \$3 per photo. There are no proposed changes to the cost of photos, as the cost helps cover the equipment and time of the prisoner photographer. Any excess funds are credited to the Prisoner Benefit Fund at the facilities.

Video Visitation Concerns

During the meeting, concerns were raised about the lack of privacy during video calls, with specific examples shared, as well as more general concerns and suggestions. There were also several comments about video calls not starting at scheduled times, as well as issues with video call quality.

MDOC Responses:

Privacy During Video Calls – The MDOC immediately addressed site specific concerns that were raised during the meeting, including the installation of new privacy curtains at several sites. The Department has also discussed the potential for the video call provider to “blur” the background during calls in the facilities for additional privacy. That function is not currently available on the video call system, but the contractor and Department will continue to explore it in the future.

Video Call Delayed Start Times – The MDOC has sent a reminder to all facilities about starting video visits at the scheduled times. When technology problems negatively impact a video call, the facility will review the potential to credit the call back to the caller so that it does not impact their monthly allotment of video visits.

Video Call Quality – The MDOC continues to work with the contractor to address any quality issues with video calls, including video or audio quality. Users are reminded to utilize a location with strong internet service. Issues with video quality should be reported to visitorsupport@gtl.net.

Visiting Restrictions

Discussions with the Family Advisory Board and public have included concerns about the use of visiting restrictions in response to certain misconduct behavior within the facilities.

MDOC Response – The use of sanctions that protect the security and operation of facilities are necessary, including visiting restrictions in certain cases. Recognizing the importance of family connection, certain changes will be made to the MDOC visiting policy regarding visiting restrictions.

1. Individuals subject to an in-person visiting restriction for substance abuse misconducts will be eligible under the new policy for video visits to remain connected with family. Individuals may still lose access to video visits for misconducts that occur while on an in-person or video visit.
2. Individuals will no longer be subject to an in-person visit restriction for misconducts related to making or consuming alcohol. Individual will still be subject to receiving misconducts and associated sanctions but will not receive a separate visiting restriction in these cases.
3. Individuals who are subject to a visiting restriction will automatically be reminded in writing when the restriction is subject to review and will receive assistance with submitting a request to have their visiting privileges restored.
4. Individuals will still be subject to a potential loss of visits for any misconduct that occurs in the visiting room, as well as two or more substance abuse misconducts, not related to alcohol, that occur within the three previous years.

Staff/Family Interactions

During the meeting, there were several examples shared about challenging staff and family interactions, although examples have also been shared about staff providing needed assistance to family and loved ones. Overall, there was a stated desire for a more consistent experience for families when communicating with the MDOC and interacting with staff.

MDOC Response:

Quality of Interactions – The Department will be developing a family communication guidance document for front desk staff that are most likely to interact with families at the facility or on the phone. While many of these front desk staff are very experienced and do a great job interacting with families, individuals who do not have this as their normal assignment may need to serve in this role to help support the facility. To assist them with their job and create a more consistent experience for families, the guidance document will include information on subjects such as:

1. How to consistently provide information about prisoner status checks, including what information can be shared (placement in segregation, loss of privileges, etc.) and what information may not be shared (privileged healthcare information).
2. Updated phone trees to ensure that calls are properly routed to staff that can assist families with questions or concerns.
3. Allowable communications during emergencies or disruptions to facility operations.
4. How to utilize various MDOC systems to obtain updated information that may be released to families.

Emergency Notifications – The MDOC will be reminding staff of appropriate steps to take to provide notification to emergency contacts. It is important that incarcerated individuals maintain an up-to-

date emergency contact with the Department. Please note that a standard medical release or power of attorney may not result in an individual being called in an emergency if the person is not listed as the current emergency contact. For custody, security, and medical privacy reasons, staff making initial contact with families in an emergency often cannot share full details or answer all questions that are asked by families.

Communication Pathways – Historically, the MDOC has used the telephone as the primary means of communicating with the facilities. The Department will be adding a dedicated email address for each facility (addresses will be shared on the facility pages on the MDOC website in the future) to address questions or concerns to specific facilities. This will allow for a record of communications and will make it more efficient to be route requests to appropriate staff for response.

Drug Availability and Treatment

During the meeting, there was a discussion about the impact that illegal drugs are having on individuals in the facilities, as well as the MDOC's efforts to address this issue. Specific concerns included the availability of drugs, the danger of drugs, and what treatment resources are available to those seeking to engage in recovery.

MDOC Responses:

Drug Prevention – The introduction and availability of drugs within MDOC facilities are a major concern for the Department. There are countless efforts occurring daily, both seen and unseen by the public, that are aimed at preventing drugs from entering the facilities, removing drugs from the facilities, and determining who is involved in the criminal enterprise of introducing drugs into the facilities. These efforts will continue, along with the deployment of additional technologies to help prevent drugs. In every case where it can be determined who is involved, the MDOC will be seeking criminal prosecution, regardless of if it is staff, members of the public, or family. Introducing drugs into the facilities is dangerous and it is illegal, and we hold people accountable for their actions.

The Department will continue to confront this issue by addressing both the “supply” and “demand” side of this problem. That means not only working to prevent the introduction of drugs, but also seeking additional resources to help reduce the demand for drugs in the facilities via effective treatment and supports. The availability of Medication Assisted Treatment has expanded in the facilities but is not the appropriate response in all cases. Other programming and supports aimed at sobriety will continue to be developed and we will ensure that self-help materials are available in all facilities.

Families and loved ones have a role to play in these efforts. While we understand that there is a culture of silence around these activities, when families directly or indirectly support these activities by engaging in efforts to introduce drugs or make payments to support the criminal enterprise of drugs in prison, the problem only worsens. The MDOC, families, and incarcerated individuals need to work together to push back on drugs in the facilities.

Testing for Individuals Seeking Treatment – The MDOC agrees that an initial important step in recovery is recognizing the issue of substance use and individuals should not be punished for declaring that they have a problem and need treatment. A reminder has been sent to all facilities to discontinue the practice of drug testing and sanctions as a response to those who are proactively

requesting treatment. The Department will also seek to clarify policy and operating procedures for these situations.

Drug testing will still occur in the facilities and individuals may be subject to testing and sanctions, even if they have previously disclosed a substance use disorder but will not be subject to testing due to expressing a need for treatment.

Miscellaneous

Question/Concern: Dog Training Program Participation at the Muskegon Correctional Facility

A concern was raised that the Muskegon Correctional Facility does not allow students in the Hope-Western Prison Education Program (HWPEP) to also serve as dog trainers.

MDOC Response – The facility has worked with HWPEP and will allow approved students to participate in the program and serve as dog trainers simultaneously. Final selection to serve in both roles will be determined by the facility and HWPEP.

Question/Concern: Reentry for Medicare Eligible Individuals

The MDOC should develop specialized reentry processes for those that are 65 years old or older to ensure that they receive earned benefits as part of their return to the community.

MDOC Response – The MDOC agrees, as this population is likely to grow in the future, so reentry should include a focus on these benefits. MDOC Healthcare and Reentry staff have already piloted providing additional supports to parolees in this demographic group based on the feedback of the Family Advisory Board but will be working to expand these services to additional eligible cases in the future.

Question/Concern: Deployment of Body Worn Cameras Within the Facilities

Several questions were asked about when body cameras would be deployed, how they would be utilized, and when the body worn camera policy would become available to the public.

MDOC Response – The MDOC has been working diligently on this project for over a year, including selecting equipment, developing a draft policy, and educating staff and other key stakeholders on the technology. This equipment is not yet in use at any of the facilities, but initial deployment at select sites within the MDOC is expected prior to the end of 2024. Due to the complexity and interest in this project, the MDOC will release more detailed information to families and the public later this summer, including a final policy for the use of this technology within the Department.

Question/Concern: Prisoner Wages

At the meeting, concerns were raised about the lack of increase in prisoner wages, particularly as costs for items such as prisoner commissary have continued to increase for several years due to inflationary pressures.

MDOC Response – The MDOC has had a group of staff from around the state looking at the issue of prisoner wages. This is a complex issue, as prisoner wages, which currently total about \$10m per year, must be paid from the MDOC budget, which does not include a special appropriation for this purpose. In addition, there are a wide variety of institutional assignments that can result in differing levels of pay based on the complexity of the work being done. The Department will be increasing prisoner wages the next time this policy is amended, but the exact amount of the increases by job type is still under discussion. Prisoners and their families will be informed of any upcoming increases in pay for institutional jobs.

To the extent possible, the MDOC has worked to control the costs of goods and services paid by incarcerated individuals and their families. Over the last few years, the cost of phone calls has been reduced from \$0.20 per minute to \$0.0735 per minute and this rate will decline to \$0.06 on January 1st. In addition, Prisoner Benefit Fund commissions have been reduced or eliminated on hundreds of prisoner commissary items in the last two years to help offset inflationary cost increases for items.

Question/Concern: Prisoner in Segregation Having Access to JPay Electronic Messaging

At the meeting, a request was made for individual in Administrative Segregation to have access to JPay to allow for incoming and outgoing electronic messages.

MDOC Response – Currently, individuals in Administrative Segregation may receive printed copies of incoming JPay messages. Access to create and send outgoing messages is not possible, as out-of-cell time in these units is highly structured for safety reasons. As a result, it is not possible for individuals to access message kiosks to compose or send new messages, but they may continue to prepare US Mail in their cells, which can be sent to family and loved ones.

Question/Concern: Compassionate Visits

At the meeting, a question was asked about if incarcerated individuals are eligible for a special visit with family in the community like a funeral visit, but before the loved one has passed.

MDOC Response – MDOC policy allows for “Sick Bed Visits” in certain limited circumstances. The policy for these visits can be found at [04-04-140-Funeral-and-Sick-Bed-Visits-effective-03-07-22.pdf \(michigan.gov\)](#). Funeral and Sick Bed Visits are arranged with the individual prison by contacting the Warden’s Administrative Assistant.

Question/Concern: Video for Special Events (Funerals, Visits with Terminally Ill Relatives, Weddings, Etc.)

The FAB has raised the question about how technology can be leveraged to allow those that are incarcerated to engage with family during key events that they cannot attend in person.

MDOC Response – The MDOC previously changed policy to allow for individuals to watch livestreams or video of funerals or family memorial services, as well as having special video visits with immediate family members who are terminally ill if participating in person under policy cannot be approved ([MDOC Funeral and Sick Bed Visit Policy](#)). In addition, individuals may utilize the normal video visiting system to visit with family that are terminally ill if the outside user can access appropriate technology. The MDOC has explored the option for individuals to participate in certain important events, such as parent-teacher conferences and may pilot such opportunities in the future at certain sites. At the current time, there are no plans to allow for video of other events, such as weddings, graduations, etc., but the MDOC will continue to take this recommendation under advisement.

Question/Concern: Information Sharing with Families

At the meeting, there were several comments about information sharing between the MDOC and families of incarcerated loved ones.

MDOC Response – The MDOC has adopted several new communications efforts to directly connect with families in 2024. These include an update to the MDOC’s website to include a section “For Families” ([For Families \(michigan.gov\)](#)) for the first time in the Department’s history. This section of the website includes information relevant to families and will continue to expand in the future based on the feedback of families. In addition, the Department is now sending a MDOC Orientation guide to the designated loved one of every individual who is arriving at Intake to begin their incarceration. This information is also available on the MDOC’s website, along with a more in-depth family information packet.

The MDOC will continue to engage with the FAB and families to discuss effective ways to share information about the MDOC’s operations.

Question/Concern: Staff Dress Code

At the meeting, a question was asked about the allowable dress code for MDOC employees.

MDOC Response – The MDOC publicly posts its standards for employee grooming and dress. These policies can be found at [MDOC Staff Grooming Regulations](#) and [MDOC SAI and CTO Grooming Standards](#).

Question/Concern: Photos Missing from JPay Accounts

During the meeting, a concern was raised that certain photos were no longer accessible in user accounts, despite not being deleted.

MDOC Response – The MDOC spoke with JPay and neither the Department nor contractor are aware of a technical issue that would result in photos no longer being accessible. The Department has also not heard about this concern from individuals at the facilities who it could be impacting. While we will continue to monitor, we do not believe there is an issue currently with JPay allowing access to photo files.

Question/Concern: Prisoner Benefit Fund Transparency

During the meeting, a concern was raised about the lack of transparency around how funds are being utilized by the prisoner benefit fund committees at the facilities and current balances.

MDOC Response – To increase transparency related to the Prisoner Benefit Funds (PBF) at each facility, the MDOC will begin publishing an annual report beginning in 2024 showing PBF balances, revenue, and major expenditures.

Question/Concern: Inconsistency of Rejected Mail/Email

During the meeting, concerns were shared about inconsistent rejections of mail or JPay messages and a lack of information on the cause of the rejection.

MDOC Response- Rejected US mail is subject to a hearing process, during which the reason for the rejection will be shared with both parties. Rejections of JPay messages have generally only contained a limited number of pre-selected rejection messages. Staff responsible for reviewing these messages have been reminded to include as much detail as possible as to why the JPay was rejected so that senders can ensure that future messages are delivered.

As a reminder, the MDOC's policies on allowable mail and electronic messages can be found on our website at [MDOC Mail Policy](#) and [MDOC Electronic Messages Policy](#).

The MDOC also posts the restricted publications list on its website at [MDOC Restricted Publications List](#).

Question/Concern: Loss of Property During Transfers

During the meeting, concerns were shared about the loss of property during transfers between facilities, as well as during property pack ups for scenarios such as being placed in a higher custody level with reduced property allowances.

MDOC Response – The MDOC continues to stress the importance of consistent, documented property pack-ups around the state and will make this a focus in upcoming communications with the facilities. Hundreds of these pack-ups occur daily with limited issues and no missing property, but a small percentage do result in the inadvertent loss of property. It remains important that individuals maintain receipts so that they can utilize the State Administrative Board claims process if property is lost or damaged while under the control of MDOC staff.