

Wisconsin Department of Corrections: Committed to openness and transparency

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MADISON—During the commemoration of Sunshine Week, which is occurring from March 12 – 18, Department of Corrections (DOC) Secretary Jon Litscher reaffirmed DOC’s commitment to open and transparent government, noting that significant enhancements to the public records process were implemented in 2016 and that, pursuant to Governor Walker’s recently-issued executive order, DOC will be identifying information about policies, procedures, and operations to post on DOC’s website.

“We believe strongly that open and transparent government best serves the Department of Corrections as well as the media and members of the public,” said Secretary Jon Litscher. “One of my first acts as Secretary was to direct DOC leaders to review our public records process to identify ways to reduce costs to requesters, decrease response times, and identify ways to increase public access to information in line with Governor Walker’s direction to provide exemplary customer service to all individuals seeking access to public records.”

Over the last year, DOC Chief Legal Counsel Winn Collins has overseen an overhaul of the public records process.

One of the first changes made was DOC’s adoption of the Wisconsin Department of Justice’s public records fee schedule, which dropped per-page costs for paper records and scanned records by nearly half and eliminated per-page fees for

electronic records. DOC also adopted a standard location fee of \$22.54 per hour, which has resulted in significant cost savings to requesters.

The department's internal public records policies were also rewritten to comply with Executive Order 189 and DOC provided intensive training to record custodians and deputy custodians. Due to DOC's size and presence throughout Wisconsin, as well as the wide variety of records maintained by the department, DOC has more than 150 custodians who handle public record requests, making regular training of custodians critical to ensuring they understand their obligations under public records law.

In addition to public records changes, DOC has also retooled its policies to establish standard processes, based on existing state administrative code, to facilitate media access to correctional facilities. While members of the media already enjoy the same access to inmates in DOC custody and correctional facilities as members of the public, the department established a new policy for adult facilities in 2017 to ensure a consistent approach in facilitating additional access by members of the media that does not degrade institution security or impede institution operations.

DOC is currently working on division-level media policies in the Division of Community Corrections for offenders on community supervision and the Division of Juvenile Corrections for youth in DOC custody and on juvenile community supervision. All three policies encourage staff to facilitate media access while acknowledging the need to consider victims of those in DOC custody or on DOC supervision, facility security, and department operations.

"We must never forget that we are always accountable to the people of Wisconsin," noted Secretary Litscher. "Our efforts to promote transparency in government must begin from within. I regularly visit DOC worksites and facilities to listen to questions and concerns from line staff because I believe it is critically important to hear directly from line staff. I have also directed department leaders to hold regular meetings with their staff and to actively seek staff input."

Another critical aspect of DOC's continued efforts to increase openness and transparency is a revamp to the department's website, which will be unveiled later this year. The new website will increase the amount of information available to those visiting the website. Once the website launches, DOC will identify and post additional information to the department's website on a continuing basis in an effort to maximize the amount of information available to the public about department

operations.

Secretary Litscher closed by adding that “our responsibility to be open and transparent to Wisconsin citizens is integral to our function as a state government agency. We recognize that we must constantly seek opportunities to continue increasing openness and transparency. While I believe our department has made great strides over the last year, I believe that there is always more that we can do moving forward.”