



Multnomah County Sheriff's Office

501 SE HAWTHORNE BLVD., Suite 350 • Portland, OR 97214

MICHAEL REESE
SHERIFF

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503 988-4300 PHONE
503 988-4500 TTY
www.mcsos.us

January 26, 2021

Jennifer McGuirk, MPA, CIA
Multnomah County Auditor
501 SE Hawthorne Blvd., Room 601
Portland, OR 97214

Dear Auditor McGuirk,

I would first like to thank you and your staff for the thorough examination of the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) response to the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to our Corrections Division. MCSO places the highest value on the compassionate and safe care of all persons in our custody. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, MCSO worked diligently with our Health Department partners, primarily Dr. Michael Seale and Dr. Jennifer Vines, to create medically-validated response procedures to this ever-changing situation to ensure the health and safety of our staff, adults in custody (AIC's), and the public at large. I would also like to thank the auditors for recognizing the efforts of our management team and our Health Department partners in the creation of new processing and housing procedures specifically designed to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our jail system. This has been an unprecedented effort by MCSO and Health Department staff.

The audit report addresses an area of concern regarding the consistent wearing of face coverings in the jail facilities consistent with written policy and Oregon Health Authority guidelines. MCSO has received a number of complaints regarding face covering usage and has investigated each complaint individually. We have taken these complaints seriously and have issued command counseling or discipline when actionable information is reported. Command staff at the jail facilities have asked staff members, contractors, professional visitors and other agency personnel to immediately report suspected violations to on-duty supervisors so that individual violators may be held immediately accountable. We will continue to conduct spot-audits by Inspections Unit personnel and facility command to ensure compliance.

MCSO accepts the recommendations of the audit report with the following comments on implementation of those recommendations:

Recommendation 1

"To be consistent with CDC guidelines, MCSO should begin exchanging the cloth masks of adults in custody on a daily basis if they are used upon issuance of this report."

When MCSO developed cohort housing for new arrestees, there was also a corresponding need to provide AIC's with cloth face coverings. At the time, face coverings were not widely available. MCSO used our seamstress assigned to the Auxiliary Services Unit to produce cloth face coverings that met safety standards for use within a secure custody environment. (A standard off-the-shelf covering does not meet jail safety standards.) Cloth face coverings were produced as quickly as possible but we experienced a shortage as AIC's transferred out of custody.

MCSO is continuing to produce cloth face masks for use by AIC's. Jail facility command staff has created a sustainable plan for the issuance, laundering, and re-issuance of cloth face coverings to AIC's that will bring MCSO into alignment with this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

"With normal no-cost visiting options suspended because of COVID-19 precautions, MCSO should either expand the use of free-phone calls or modify lobby video visit operations to allow for safe use as soon as possible and no later than 90 days within the issuance of this report."

MCSO recognizes the critical need for AIC's to keep in contact with their family, friends, and others within their support system. We are committed to exploring every option to maintaining this positive connection contact with their loved ones.

When visiting was restricted due to COVID-19 precautions, MCSO entered into an agreement with Securus the company contracted to deliver phone and video visitation services. At our request, Securus provided more than 1700 vouchers for free video visitations to AIC's.¹

MCSO has also used internal funds to provide two free telephone calls per week for AIC's. The County was able to secure CARES reimbursement funding which has allowed us to continue this level of telephone call access. We will continue to seek replacement funds for these accounts and potentially expand telephone access.

With regard to the re-opening of jail lobby video visitations, there are a number of issues that make this difficult to achieve. Since the audit report was written, there has been a significant increase in community spread of COVID-19. Allowing public access to jail lobbies creates an increased risk of exposure to members of the public and staff at the jail facilities. At this time, public health officials are advising against visitations at our jail facilities. We are also experiencing a staffing shortage as the increased community spread is having a negative impact on MCSO personnel. Currently it is unlikely we would be able to fill the Facility Security Officer posts needed to open jail lobbies to visitation. This situation could improve in the future as vaccinations occur. MCSO is committed to working with public health officials and prioritizing the safe re-opening of our facilities for visitors.

Sincerely,



Michael Reese
Multnomah County Sheriff

¹ Securus quickly recognized the humanitarian need to waive its normal fees for these services and granted these vouchers outside of the contract they have with the County.