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Delaware Department of Correction Partners with Independent Experts to Improve Inmates' Access to Healthcare and Grievance Process

(Dover, Delaware) To implement recommendations from the Independent Review Team that addressed security issues at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center (JTVCC), the Delaware Department of Correction (DOC) is partnering with independent professionals to review and assess the delivery of healthcare services to inmates at JTVCC, and to evaluate the inmate grievance process. Proposals for improvements, where needed, will be presented to the DOC in the coming months. "Upon receiving the Final Report of the Independent Review Team on September 1, 2017, we acted swiftly to prioritize the 41 recommendations," said DOC Commissioner Perry Phelps. "We are focused on the delivery of services and programs that meet inmate needs and standards, and on officer safety and training as we continue to modernize operations. By partnering with independent experts in correctional healthcare and access to justice issues, we are serious about getting this right."

Recommendation 9.1 of the Independent Review Team's Final Report states: "The DOC should conduct an independent assessment of the health care and mental health care provided at the JTVCC." To implement this recommendation, the DOC has contracted with the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) to conduct an independent assessment starting in January with the following objectives:

- Evaluate and provide feedback on the quality of health services based on compliance with the NCCHC *Standards for Health Services in Prisons*.
- Assess health services policies and procedures pertaining to the Non-Emergency Health Care Requests and Services (i.e., Sick Call)
- Recommend policy and procedure changes that can result in improved Sick Call process and overall health care efficiency and effectiveness.
- Review charts, procedures and policies pertaining to requests for Sick Call visits and care, as well as medical, behavioral and mental health, and dental care.

- Review the overall process for managing non-emergency health care services and the timing between the initial request for Sick Call visits, delivery of care and the referral process to an outside healthcare specialist.
- Review the process and frequency of Sick Call appointment rescheduling

NCCHC professionals will conduct the independent assessment over the next several months and issue a report. DOC Chief of the Bureau of Correctional Healthcare Services, Dr. Marc Richman, will lead implementation of improvements based on the independent assessment and report.

“We are committed to assuring all offenders receive the medical and behavioral health care they need,” said Dr. Richman. “An independent, professional review of the sick call process will help us assess improvements needed from request to service delivery.”

The DOC also plans to hire an independent agency to make recommendations for improving the inmate grievance process.

Recommendation 10.4 of the Independent Review Team’s Final Report states: “The JTVCC grievance processes and procedures should be reviewed and revised to be more efficient and fairer.”

The DOC has issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to contract with a respected outside organization to review JTVCC’s grievance process. Qualified applicants with experience in access to justice issues have until February 8, 2018 to submit proposals, with a contract expected to be awarded by April 2018. The independent agency selected will conduct extensive observations of the grievance procedure at JTVCC, attend grievance hearings, review past grievance complaints and meet with inmates. The provider will be expected to issue a thorough preliminary report at the end of 6 months that:

- Documents a comprehensive summary/overview of the inmate grievance process;
- Documents observations and recommendations relating to the inmate grievance process;
- Summarizes statistical and procedural findings; and,
- Recommends grievance process improvements.

Based on funding and performance, the DOC will have the option to extend the provider’s contract for an additional two years and extend the grievance process review to other Level V correctional facilities.

Updates on implementation of both of these initiatives will be included in the July 2018 public report issued by Governor John Carney’s Special Assistant assigned to the DOC.

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