

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Contact:** Kate Burkart, (907) 465-4970, [kate.burkhart@akleg.gov](mailto:kate.burkhart@akleg.gov)**Ombudsman Completes Systemic Investigation of Goose Creek Dental Care**

February 26, 2024, JUNEAU — Alaska State Ombudsman Kate Burkhart today released a report of an ombudsman-initiated investigation of the Alaska Department of Corrections Dental Services Program at Goose Creek Correctional Center (GCCC). The Ombudsman found that the Department of Corrections (DOC) is unable to timely provide medically necessary dental health care to people incarcerated at GCCC and is inconsistent in its responses to dental care requests and complaints.

In February and May 2023, the Ombudsman received separate complaints from people incarcerated at GCCC alleging unreasonable delays in dental care. One complaint was about a lack of timely care and an insistence on only treating painful teeth with extraction. The other complaint was about a multi-year wait for dentures and inconsistencies in responses to questions about this wait. After reviewing records and evaluating information related to these complaints, Burkhart determined the complaints were indicative of a systemic issue with dental care at GCCC. Pursuant to state statute, she opened an ombudsman-initiated investigation in July 2023. That same month, the Ombudsman received a third complaint also alleging a lack of dental care and over-reliance on extractions at GCCC, which was also considered in this investigation.

The ombudsman investigation showed that DOC is unable to meet its obligation to provide incarcerated people with timely access to necessary dental health care services. The investigation also showed that DOC failed to follow policy in responding to both requests for dental health care and grievances about dental health care. The evidence showed that insufficient dental program staff and supervision, and systemic strain from a growing population of unsentenced people at GCCC, contributed to these issues.

In general, providing dental health care services in a prison environment presents many challenges. Incarcerated people have a high level of need for dental care and there is increased demand for dental care caused by an aging and growing population. Rising costs, budgetary constraints, and shortages in dental staff are also factors.

Evidence showed that providing services at GCCC, a minimum-to-medium security facility and the state's largest prison, presents additional challenges. GCCC was designed for a sentenced population, but roughly half of its population at the time of the investigation was unsentenced, which places additional strain on the dental program. The dental hygienist position has been vacant

for approximately two years. The facility is also a roughly 40-minute drive from the nearest city, which can make recruiting and retaining staff difficult.

Even with budgetary and staffing challenges, DOC has a legal duty to provide timely access to necessary dental health care services and meet the standards established in DOC policy. To help the agency meet these obligations, the Ombudsman made 12 recommendations to DOC to address systemic issues and strengthen GCCC's dental program.

These recommendations, which were in part shaped by the agency consultation process, included:

- Requesting funds to hire an additional dedicated dental team at GCCC.
- Designating additional security staff for the GCCC dental clinic to support more efficient clinic operations.
- Negotiating a Letter of Agreement to hire a dental hygienist at a higher rate of pay pending the outcome of a statewide salary review project.
- Securing contract dentists and dental hygienists to provide medically necessary dental care to people on the waitlist, pending improved capacity at the GCCC dental clinic.
- Hiring a Chief Dental Officer to supervise and manage DOC's dental program statewide.
- Integrating the systems used to keep dental and health records to ensure medical staff have access to dental staff's notes.
- Providing training on the proper handling and investigation of medical grievances.
- Implementing recommendations DOC accepted in Ombudsman Investigation [2019-07-0115](#) — an [investigation into the provision of dental health care at Lemon Creek Correctional Center](#) – specifically an audit of DOC's Dental Services Program and creating an action plan to reduce the number of incarcerated people waitlisted for dental health care services.
- Securing capital funding to ensure the dental clinic at Anchorage Correctional Complex – West can be reopened as soon as possible.

During the investigation, DOC accepted and agreed to implement the Ombudsman's recommendation that the DOC Division of Health and Rehabilitation Services share a finalized Dental Clinical Care Guide with GCCC medical staff, dental staff, and superintendents, and host a briefing for all relevant staff, to ensure their understanding of the guide and its implementation. DOC fully accepted the remaining recommendations, and has begun making efforts to increase access to dental health care, including examinations and dentures, through contract dental staff.

The public report of the investigation, with detailed recommendations, is available at [ombud.alaska.gov/case-summaries/](http://ombud.alaska.gov/case-summaries/).

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