

Massachusetts DoC announces plan to suspend housing operations at MCI-Cedar Junction

Two-year reorganization strategy to enhance operational efficiency and cost-savings solutions amid historic low prison population.

The Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) announced a three-phased, two-year plan to suspend housing operations at MCI-Cedar Junction in Walpole. Amid the state's lowest prison population in 35 years, the Department conducted a detailed, agency-wide review to identify opportunities to enhance operational efficiency and advance cost-saving solutions. The strategic decision to suspend Cedar Junction's general population housing and re-locate its reception and diagnostic center is based on a thorough assessment of decreased housing needs and the aging facility's exorbitant maintenance costs. Furthermore, this action aligns with the Department's commitment to eliminate restrictive housing and reform its approach to discipline.

Cedar Junction currently operates at 68% capacity with a population of approximately 525 inmates. The maximum-security facility provides three core functions within the DOC. It serves as the Department's reception and diagnostic center where newly incarcerated men are evaluated for security classification and await transfer to the appropriate facility. The facility also houses a small operational workforce of less than 50 men in a medium security setting and maintains two units for the most serious security concerns, the Department Disciplinary Unit (DDU) and the Behavioral Management Unit (BMU).

“The Baker-Polito Administration has worked closely with the Legislature, community partners and advocates to create successful reentry programs and implement meaningful reforms to criminal justice,” said Public Safety and Security Secretary Terrence Reidy. “The fruit of that work – the lowest level of incarceration in decades – was achieved by providing at-risk individuals with pathways to positive life choices, creating new re-entry services, and empowering returning citizens to rebuild their lives in meaningful ways. It also allows us to consolidate the number of operational facilities and renew our focus on delivering effective services to women and men in DOC’s care.”

Massachusetts has long been a leader in reducing incarceration. In reports from 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 the Vera Institute for Justice found that Massachusetts’ incarceration rate was the lowest in the nation, decreasing by over 2,000 during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a record low of nearly 6,000 incarcerated people.

The first phase of the two-year reorganization will start in 60-90 days with the relocation of the reception and diagnostic center to Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center (SBCC) in Lancaster. SBCC provides a more modern, climate-controlled facility where living spaces better reflect those that incarcerated individuals will experience after their initial 60-90-day classification is complete. Individuals currently living at Cedar Junction awaiting classification will complete the normal process and be transferred to an appropriate facility. The operational workforce will remain at Cedar Junction to support limited ongoing operations.

“DOC remains committed to stewarding taxpayer resources responsibly and fulfilling our rehabilitation-focused mission,” DOC Commissioner Carol Mici said. “This decision, and the subsequent consolidation of resources across fewer locations, allows us to eliminate redundancies and deepen our investments in programming, staffing, and services.”

Both the BMU and DDU will continue operating until 2024 while the Department identifies a suitable alternative for each population's very specific programming, services, and security needs. During phase two, inmates living in the BMU will be relocated to appropriate units in other state facilities. In phase three, the Department will dissolve the DDU and relocate inmates. Dissolving the DDU aligns with DOC's 3-year ongoing process to reform its approach to discipline.

Opened in 1955, Cedar Junction is one of Massachusetts oldest correctional facilities. Its aging infrastructure has become costly to maintain and requires significant repairs. After a thorough review with the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance, experts identified nearly \$30M in necessary infrastructure repairs with the electrical upgrades alone estimated to cost \$22M.