

State Department of Corrections Watching Legislative Session

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - Lawmakers returned to Olympia this week for the legislative session which is expected to result in many important budget decisions for the Department of Corrections. Communications Officer Maria Peterson tells KBKW while many staff members are aware that DOC is impacted by budget decisions, fewer are aware of how the agency prepares for it. "We are closely involved in the legislative process because lawmakers are making decisions that have a significant impact on our policies and procedures," said Sandy Mullins, Acting Assistant Secretary of the Policy Support Division. "Legislators have to make difficult decisions, especially during economic recessions, so they rely on us for information and analysis. And they usually need it quickly."



"That's why so much time and effort goes in to preparing for a legislative session, said Mullins. There are several phases to the Department's legislative coordination. During the preparation phase the Department's Legislative coordinator, Clela Steelhammer, works with people in all divisions to give accurate, consistent answers to Legislators' questions which typically stem from a budget idea. "They may want to know how much we spend on offender food, UAs, or programs, for example," said Steelhammer. "It's important that we analyze what they are asking so that we can get them the right answer, since many of these ideas then become language in bills which can become law." DOC staff members at Headquarters respond to data requests by providing the estimated financial impact — typically how much money it would cost or save — and how it could potentially impact the staff and operations.

"Legislators have ideas on many different proposed changes, and they rely on us to tell them how that idea would impact DOC," Steelhammer said. "It's built on credibility because they trust us to provide them with honest and accurate information." The Department also invites legislators and their aides to tour prisons and community corrections offices to educate them about issues that are frequently discussed during legislative hearings. Reception, health services, food services, sustainability projects and offender programs are frequently the focus of legislative tours. "If our Legislature understand our operations and have accurate

information," said Mullins. "they can make the best decisions for public safety. During the session, the Department monitors legislative activity, budget discussions and the bills that could impact the agency if they become a law. Sometimes legislators will request that DOC provide subject matter experts to testify during hearings and work sessions. After the session the Department immediately begins implementing new laws." "The work is very cyclical," said Steelhammer. "Even when session is over we answer questions from legislators' constituents which can end up as language in a future bill. The process never truly ends."