*Welcome to LLA Reports, a podcast produced by the Louisiana Legislative Auditor’s office. This podcast is intended to be an oral representation of the written report it highlights and is primarily for the use of the Louisiana Legislature.*

This is Kristen Jacobs. I’m a senior auditor for LLA Performance Audit Services. This episode of LLA Reports focuses on our recently released report titled “Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Correctional Facilities.”

The purpose of this audit was to provide information on the Department of Corrections’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic in correctional facilities.

We found that the Department of Corrections – or DOC – faced multiple issues and challenges in addressing the pandemic.

While the department’s protocols complied with guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for testing, medical isolation, screening, visitation, personal protective equipment, social distancing, and transfers, DOC did not have processes in place to verify that its correctional facilities followed these protocols.

Although DOC was in regular contact with facilities, it could have implemented a process to verify that facilities were following protocols to reduce the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the protocols may not have been uniformly implemented at all prison facilities.

In addition, DOC administered more than 21,000 COVID-19 tests to prisoners in state correctional facilities from March 2020 through January 2021. Of the more than 8,200 prisoners tested during that time frame, approximately 40 percent had a positive result.

However, DOC did not collect similar COVID-19 information related to test results and infection rates for state prisoners housed in local correctional centers, even though approximately half of state prisoners are in these facilities.

DOC also faced challenges in providing programming for prisoners during the pandemic and reported a sharp decrease in the number of education completions between April and June 2020 because such programs were suspended to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

In addition, DOC stopped allowing in-person visitation at its facilities during the pandemic and had difficulties implementing video visitation services.

We found as well that, out of 1,100 potential candidates, DOC furloughed 68 out of 100 prisoners approved by the Furlough Review Panel. The panel reviewed a total of 594 prisoners, but it was suspended in June 2020 after Louisiana entered phase two of recovery.

Nationwide, prison populations declined after the start of the pandemic primarily because of diversion efforts that reduced prison admissions and not because of releases from prisons.

We also found that DOC’s existing staffing challenges were exacerbated during the pandemic because of the increase in staff absences.From March through December 2020, correctional facility staff used a total of 1.5 million hours of leave, a 21.7 percent increase from 1.3 million the prior year. In addition, staff worked 1.2 million hours of overtime.

As a result of our audit, we developed two recommendations. The first recommendation was that DOC should develop a process to verify that its correctional facilities implement pandemic protocols.

The second recommendation was that DOC should ensure it collects pandemic-related information about state prisoners housed in local correctional centers.

In its response to our report, which is detailed in the report appendix, DOC officials disagreed with the first recommendation and agreed with the second recommendation.

*We hope you found this podcast informative, and that you’ll follow future episodes of LLA Reports. You can subscribe to LLA Reports at Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or your favorite podcast platform.*

*This podcast was created as a part of the audit report just discussed and is intended primarily for the use of the Louisiana Legislature. The full report and the podcast can be found on the LLA’s website at* [*www.lla.la.gov*](http://www.lla.la.gov)*.*

*Thank you for listening.*