

**REPORT OF THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS**

**Recommendations for
Enhancing the Quality of
Visitation at State Correctional
Facilities (Chapter 572, 2026)**

TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA



SENATE DOCUMENT NO. 7

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
2026**



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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October 1, 2026

The Honorable Susan Clarke Schaar
Clerk of the Senate of Virginia
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

The Honorable G. Paul Nardo
Clerk of the Virginia House of Delegates
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA:

Pursuant to Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly, please see the enclosed report addressing the convening of the legislatively mandated work group and the ensuing policy recommendations detailed herein.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any assistance as you review this information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Walters", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Joseph W. Walters
Director

**Recommendations for Enhancing the
Quality of Visitation at State
Correctional Facilities Pursuant to
Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of
Assembly**



Department of Corrections

**Director Joseph W. Walters
October 1, 2026**

Preface

The Virginia Department of Corrections (the Department) remains committed to strengthening connections with loved ones and ensuring that visitation practices reflect modern correctional standards, evidence-based rehabilitation, and the needs of incarcerated individuals. Over the past several months, the Department has introduced numerous enhancements aimed at improving the safety and dignity of the visitation experience – such as handholding, updated seating practices, and renewed access to vending options and family-friendly amenities. During this same period, the Department also lifted enhanced sanctions that previously limited visitation privileges and increased visitation table capacity systemwide to support a more accessible and comfortable environment. These efforts began prior to the convening of the work group and demonstrate the Department’s dedication to modernizing visitation in a thoughtful, security-conscious manner.

Pursuant to Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly, the General Assembly directed the Department to convene a work group to examine existing policies, identify barriers, and develop practical recommendations to strengthen family engagement statewide. The work group, composed of a diverse array of stakeholders as designated in Code, met June 22 – 24, 2026, at the Department’s Academy for Staff Development in Crozier, Virginia. During these three days, the Department presented on current visitation operations and facilitated structured discussions that ensured all voices – including visitors, advocacy organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals, staff, and subject-matter experts – were meaningfully included.

The recommendations presented in this report reflect the collaborative, data-informed work of the participants and align with the Department’s pre-existing efforts to enhance visitation. Together, they provide a thoughtful roadmap of additional improvements that complement ongoing initiatives, reinforce rehabilitative goals, and maintain the critical balance between family connection and institutional safety. The Department appreciates the insight and dedication of the work group members and looks forward to applying these recommendations to further strengthen visitation across Virginia’s correctional facilities.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to fulfill the requirements set forth in Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly, which directs the Virginia Department of Corrections to convene a work group and evaluate opportunities to modernize and strengthen the Department's visitation system statewide. The legislation outlines five specific goals to achieve:

1. Balancing the encouragement of appropriate physical affection between visitors and prisoners with security needs;
2. Implementing a feasible family visitation enhancement program that offers access to additional in-person visitation days and hours as achievable incentives while maintaining baseline levels of in-person visitation access to all prisoners and their loved ones;
3. Implementing a plan that allows for extended meals with families during in-person visitation at and around selected holidays, where visitors may bring or purchase special meals;
4. Implementing a policy to allow for additional visitation access for minor and infrequent visitors;
5. Developing a plan to return in-person visitation to 2019 levels.

In accordance with these statutory directives, the Department convened a diverse group of stakeholders and facilitated a structured, collaborative review of current policies, operational practices, and opportunities for improvement. This report summarizes those discussions, presents the work group's recommendations, and outlines the Department's position and planned actions for each required focus area.

Acknowledgements

The Department extends its sincere appreciation to the members of the work group for generously dedicating their time, expertise, and lived experiences to this important effort. Their thoughtful engagement, open dialogue, and commitment to improving the visitation experience for incarcerated individuals and their loved ones were essential to the development of this report.

The Department also wishes to recognize Delegate Bonita Anthony, whose leadership in introducing the legislation that established the work group made this collaborative process possible. Her commitment to strengthening connections and advancing evidence-based correctional practices laid the foundation for the meaningful work reflected in these pages. The Department found this process highly effective and look forward to utilizing a similar approach in the future to discuss a wide breadth of topics.

Additionally, the Department acknowledges our colleagues at our Academy for Staff Development in Crozier, Virginia, for graciously hosting the work group and providing logistical support, meals, and accommodations that facilitated productive and inclusive discussion. Their professionalism and hospitality contributed greatly to the success of the work group's deliberations.

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Work Group Membership

The composition of the work group was established by the General Assembly in Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly, which specified the relevant stakeholders required to participate. In accordance with this statutory directive, the Department convened representatives from each designated stakeholder group, ensuring that the work group reflected the diverse perspectives outlined in the legislation.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders included advocacy organizations, regular visitors of the Department's facilities, individuals with lived experience, legal partners, and subject-matter experts whose insights were essential to shaping practical, family-centered recommendations.

The following stakeholders were in attendance¹:

Delegate Holly Seibold, Virginia House of Delegates

Angela White, From Conviction 2 Redemption

Santia Nance, Sistas in Prison Reform

Hannah Potts, UpToDate Inside Virginia

Nicole Deyo, Bending the Bars

Justice Traynham, The Humanization Project

Narissa Rahaman, Equality Virginia

Quadaire Patterson, Brilliance Behind Bars

Andrea Fenster, Legal Aid Justice Center

Kenneth Hunter, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy

Kanisha Marshall, Regular Visitor

Richard Vorhis, Office of the Attorney General

Virginia Department of Corrections Staff

Department staff participants represented leadership across operations, mental health services, professional standards, visitation management, and facility administration, providing critical operational context and ensuring recommendations aligned with safety, security, and institutional feasibility.

The following Department staff were in attendance:

Rick White, Regional Administrator

Lamont Carrington, Assistant Deputy Director for Professional Standards

Julie Fink, Chief of Mental Health and Wellness

David Anderson, Lead Warden

¹ Invitations were extended to the ACLU of Virginia and the Prison Policy Initiative in accordance with statutory requirements. However, these organizations either declined to participate or did not respond to the Department's outreach.

Ross Maurice, Warden
Rose Durbin, Director of Community and Legislative Affairs
Whitney Barton, Director of Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement
Eric Barton, Legislative Liaison
Teresa Harvey, Visitation Unit Manager
Melissa Welch, Operations Support Manager/Contract Administrator
Cristyl Word, Mental Health Clinician
Yvonne Allen, Executive Assistant
Constance Walker-Clark, Intern

Executive Summary

Pursuant to Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly, the Virginia Department of Corrections convened a work group to review current visitation policies, identify barriers, and develop practical recommendations across five legislatively mandated goals. The work group met June 22 – 24, 2026, at the Department’s Academy for Staff Development in Crozier, Virginia, where participants engaged in structured discussions informed by comprehensive presentations on existing visitation operations.

The work group was composed of individuals representing categories of stakeholders specifically designated by the General Assembly, including advocacy organizations, regular visitors of the Department’s facilities, individuals with lived experiences, legal and research partners, mental-health professionals, trauma-informed practitioners, social scientists, and corrections staff and administrators. Their diverse expertise and perspectives ensured a thorough review grounded in both operational realities and family-centered needs.

Across all five goals, stakeholders identified several consistent themes: a need for clearer standards regarding appropriate physical affection; greater flexibility in seating arrangements; improved child-friendly spaces; more accessible scheduling options for families facing distance or infrequent visitation; expanded opportunities for shared holiday meals; and enhanced communication to visitors regarding visitation processes and special-visit eligibility. Members also observed that perceived declines in post-pandemic visitation levels were influenced by changes in scheduling practices and increased use of video visitation, highlighting the importance of standardized data collection to better understand statewide trends.

The recommendations that emerged from the work group received unanimous stakeholder support and include authorizing controlled hand on hand movement during visitation; permitting adjacent seating; improving child-friendly amenities; reintroducing secure vending options; evaluating table capacity and visit-block durations; strengthening family reunification programming; expanding eligibility for special visits; enhancing communication materials; piloting options for holiday meals; and improving visitation data analytics. Several of these improvements were already underway prior to the work group’s recommendations, demonstrating the Department’s proactive efforts to modernize visitation in alignment with rehabilitation while also preserving public safety.

Collectively, the work group believes these recommendations will strengthen the emotional, social, and rehabilitative value of visitation while preserving the safety and security required within state correctional facilities. They support more natural interaction, increase access for vulnerable visitor groups, improve communication and transparency, and introduce data-driven methods for monitoring visitation operations. Implementation of these recommendations allows the Department to enhance consistency and equity across institutions, restore and stabilize in-person visitation levels, and advance its mission of supporting prosocial behavior, family reunification, and successful reentry.

Background

The Virginia Department of Corrections administers a statewide visitation system designed to support connections, promote prosocial behavior, contribute to rehabilitation, and successful reentry. Visitation has long served as a stabilizing influence within correctional environments, and the Department's policies are structured to maintain both equitable access and institutional security. The current visitation framework includes detailed standards governing visitor approval, screening requirements, schedules, staff responsibilities, and facility operations. These policies ensure consistency across diverse institutions while accommodating the varying needs of visitors and incarcerated individuals.

In-person visitation occurs on weekends and recognized state holidays, with each eligible incarcerated individual guaranteed a baseline level of weekly access. Extended visits may be permitted when space and staffing allow. To increase flexibility for visitors unable to travel, the Department also offers video visitation, which has become a widely used option. Visitor approval is managed centrally through the Central Visitation Unit (CVU), which reviews applications, conducts background checks, and verifies eligibility. Approved visitors must comply with identification, attire, and security screening protocols prior to entry. Special visits may be granted when standard schedules cannot meet individual needs, particularly for long-distance travelers, infrequent visitors, minors, individuals with disabilities, attorneys, clergy, and others whose circumstances require accommodation. These practices aim to balance accessibility with necessary security requirements.

Visitation operations have evolved significantly in recent years. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many facilities relied on first-come, first-served access, leading to overcrowded lobbies, extended wait times, and instances where visitors traveled long distances only to discover limitations on space or time. The COVID-19 pandemic required the Department to implement a statewide visitation scheduler in direct response to the COVID-19 social distancing requirements. While this improved efficiency, it also changed the way visitation rooms appeared – moving from consistently crowded spaces to more controlled and scheduled environments. Additionally, the use of video visitation grew substantially following the pandemic, mirroring broader societal trends and contributing to differences in how in-person visitation levels are perceived today.

The Department partners with Assisting Families of Inmates (AFOI) to reduce transportation barriers for families. AFOI's subsidized transportation programs help ensure that geographic distance does not prevent incarcerated individuals from maintaining essential relationships. During the 2026 legislative session, the General Assembly directed the Department to convene a work group to review existing practices considering changing needs, evolving visitation patterns, and stakeholder feedback. This directive prompted a comprehensive assessment of operational challenges, family engagement needs, child-centered considerations, opportunities to introduce holiday meals, and efforts to stabilize visitation levels comparable to those achieved in 2019.

Methodology

The Department of Corrections followed a structured, transparent, and consensus-based process to convene the work group, facilitate its discussions, and develop the recommendations contained in this report. This methodology reflects both the statutory requirements of Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly and the Department's commitment to ensuring that all relevant stakeholders were meaningfully engaged. The following describes the full process used from planning through drafting, including feedback requested by stakeholders during post-session review.

Work Group Convening and Structure

In accordance with Chapter 571, the Department convened the work group for a three-day session held June 22 – 24, 2026, at the Academy for Staff Development in Crozier, Virginia. The group assembled each day from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Stakeholder membership reflected all categories outlined in statute, including advocacy organizations, regular visitors to the Department, formerly incarcerated individuals, legal partners, mental-health clinicians, subject-matter experts, and Department staff with operational, administrative, and security expertise. Four members were formerly incarcerated individuals with direct visitation experience, and the statutory social scientist role was fulfilled by Dr. Taj Mahon-Haft through his designated representative.

Opening Session and Informational Briefings

The first session consisted of a listening session during which Department staff received concerns, priority issues, and opportunities for improvement directly from stakeholders. This ensured that discussions were shaped by stakeholder perspectives from the outset.

Following the listening session, the Visitation Unit Manager delivered an overview of current visitation policies, operational practices, and security considerations. The Department also provided additional operational briefings throughout the sessions to ensure discussions were informed by accurate procedural and institutional context.

Structured Discussion Process

Each of the statutory goals identified in Chapter 571 was allotted a dedicated ninety-minute discussion block. To ensure clarity and statutory faithfulness, the session began with a reading of the Code language. Moderators then asked stakeholders to articulate their interpretation of the language, intended outcomes, and any perceived barriers.

Stakeholders subsequently requested that the Department identify potential implementation challenges and discussions progressed both organically and in a facilitated format.

Development and Consensus of Recommendations

The final three hours of the session were dedicated exclusively to drafting recommendations. This drafting period was stakeholder-led – the Department did not propose or advance recommendations independently. All recommendations included in this report were presented verbally by the stakeholders.

A verbal-consensus model was used for approval of recommendations. Any recommendation that received no voiced opposition was considered to have consensus and therefore included in the report. No formal vote was taken at the request of the group.

Post-Session Review and Feedback Process

Draft recommendations were shared with work group participants – including the patron of the legislation, Delegate Anthony – on July 2, 2026, with a request for feedback by July 10, 2026. Only one piece of feedback was received during that timeframe. Additionally, stakeholders were informed that all recommendations could be achieved by changes in internal policy and practice and that no legislative proposals were necessary.

Stakeholders were further advised that all recommendations – regardless of the Department’s position – would be included in the report. In the case that a recommendation was not approved by the Department’s senior leadership, the report explains that decisions were based on security concerns. Stakeholders were notified that, following their review, the report would undergo review by the Director of the Department, Joseph Walters, the Secretary of Public Safety, Stanley Meador, and the Governor’s Office in accordance with agency reporting protocol.

Determination of Need for Additional Sessions

Although two sessions were originally planned, the work group agreed at the conclusion of the first session that they did not wish to reconvene unless new information warranted further discussion. The Department committed to sharing the draft report before finalization, with a goal of a mid-August distribution. The draft of the full report was sent on August 24, 2026, with a request that stakeholders indicate by August 31, 2026, whether they believed a second meeting was necessary. The work group indicated that they desired to meet virtually to provide feedback. Two meetings were held on September 8, 2026, to satisfy that request.

Reporting Timeline and Statutory Compliance

Chapter 571 requires the final report to be submitted to the General Assembly no later than October 1, 2026. As such, the Department proceeded with revisions responsive to the work group’s feedback while maintaining the statutory timeline.

Taken together, the Department’s methodology resulted in recommendations that are both work group generated and operationally informed, and which reflect the collaborative intent of the General Assembly in establishing the work group.

Overview of Visitation System

The Virginia Department of Corrections currently oversees approximately 22,000 incarcerated individuals housed in state facilities. These individuals are managed across a total of 43 institutional facilities covering the full spectrum of security classifications.

Security levels within this system range from minimum-security work centers – designed for lower security individuals – up to maximum security individuals at major institutions. Additionally, secure hospital units offer medical focused secure care. This structure allows the Department to effectively balance public safety, rehabilitation, and operational needs across a diverse correctional population.

Visitation Procedure

The Virginia Department of Corrections maintains a structured and secure visitation process designed to support family connections while ensuring institutional safety.

Prospective visitors – both adults and minors – must submit an online application for approval and renewal every three years. In-state visitors should apply at least 45 days before their visit and out-of-state visitors should apply at least 90 days in advance.

Once approved, visits are scheduled through the online “visitation scheduler” permitting one in-person visit per weekend and allowing visits to be scheduled up to 14 days in advance.

In-person visits take place on weekends and state holidays from 8:00 am – 4:45 pm. Visitors are expected to arrive early for security screening and must present a valid government-issued photo identification. The dress code is strictly enforced with a list of prohibited attire listed on the Department’s website and posted at the facility entrance.

Provisions are in place to accommodate visitors with disabilities or medical conditions. In such cases, alternate screening procedures or service animal access may be permitted with advance notice and documentation.

Video visitation is also available but must be made through a separate scheduling process and still comply with dress codes and pre-registration. Visitors are not required to apply to participate in video visitation.

Special considerations are made to accommodate visitors who are minors. Minors must be approved and accompanied by an adult visitor who is an immediate family member or authorized guardian. If accompanied by a non-parental adult, a notarized statement or court order is required at every visit.

Together, these procedures, as outlined in Operating Procedure 851.1, ensure that visitation remains consistent, transparent, and accessible. This reinforces the Department’s commitment to rehabilitation, public safety, and public engagement.

Visitation Data

While the Department can provide annual visitation totals from 2020 to the present, data from earlier years is incomplete and unreliable due to no statutory requirement to collect visitation specific information, which limited the previous tracking process.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department implemented a new statewide visitation system that significantly improved the ability to collect, verify, and analyze visitation data. As a result, data prior to the system's rollout is incomplete and not consistently comparable with current reporting. Current reporting capabilities remain limited due to constraints within the existing scheduling system. However, the Department is currently drafting a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the planned procurement of a new scheduler and will specifically include enhanced data-reporting functionality as a required feature of that solution.

Please refer to the table below for available visitation data from 2020 through 2025.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of in-person visits scheduled	N/A	10,289	39,126	63,364	66,846	62,708
Number of video visits scheduled	114,022	149,010	143,697	164,159	178,223	314,877

Recommendations

Goal One - Balancing the encouragement of appropriate physical affection between visitors and prisoners with security needs.

Issues Identified

During the work group's review of current visitation practices related to physical affection, several challenges were identified that impact both the quality of interaction and the clarity of security expectations. Advocates and regular visitors expressed concern that existing restrictions on physical contact, though intended to enhance facility security, often create an environment that feels overly rigid and inconsistent with the rehabilitative purpose of visitation. The work group noted that limitations on handholding, including when movement results in warnings or the potential termination of a visit, can undermine the emotional connection visitors and incarcerated individuals seek during their limited time together.

Additionally, the absence of uniform guidance on permissible physical contact places correctional staff in the difficult position of making rapid, subjective determinations on whether a gesture is acceptable. This can contribute to inconsistent enforcement and create tension between staff and visitors. Seating arrangements were also identified as a barrier to meaningful interaction. Visitors are frequently seated opposite the incarcerated individual, and spouses or partners may not be permitted to sit adjacent when multiple visitors are present, reducing the comfort and natural flow of engagement.

Finally, the work group found that visitation environments do not always adequately accommodate children. Although children are often the individuals most affected by parental incarceration, visitation rooms may lack child-friendly design elements or activities that help reduce anxiety and encourage positive parent-child bonding. Collectively, these issues demonstrate the need for clearer standards, improved training, and more supportive visitation environments.

Work Group Recommendations

Recommendation 1.1 Authorize hand-on-hand movement during visitation and develop a staff training video on appropriate hand-to-hand interaction.	
Explanation	This recommendation explicitly expands permissible physical interaction. It provides clarity and consistency for staff and visitors, reducing unnecessary corrective interactions and enhancing the emotional quality of engagement. The development of a training video will equip staff to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate contact, supporting security without limiting healthy human connection.
Background	N/A
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	The Department is supportive of authorizing hand-to-hand movement during visitation. The Department also endorses the creation of a staff training video addressing appropriate hand-to-hand interaction. The video development and utilization will fall under the approval of the Department's senior leadership.
Implementation	Change in operating procedure; Development of a video and subsequent implementation of video to be included in initial staff training and required continuing education training.
Timeline	The Deputy Director for Institutions issued a memo effective July 1, 2026, specifying the change in operating procedure. Training video will be filmed by November 1, 2026, with all security staff and facility leadership viewing the video by January 1, 2027.
Recommendation 1.2 Allow any visitor to sit in the adjacent seat to the incarcerated individual during visitation.	

Explanation	Current practice does not guarantee adjacent seating and often places visitors opposite the incarcerated individual. Allowing adjacent seating improves natural interaction, supports meaningful communication, and increases the dignity of the visitation environment, while still preserving line-of-sight security supervision.
Background	Work group members advised Department staff that there was a common practice to place visitors across from the incarcerated individual during visitation rather than allowing them to sit adjacently.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	Change in operating procedure
Timeline	A memo advising this change will be issued to staff by the Deputy Director for Institutions by October 1, 2026.
Evaluation Criteria	N/A
Recommendation 1.3 Facilitate improvements to child-friendly atmosphere.	
Explanation	Operating Procedure 851.1 already requires facilities to provide adequate waiting areas and ensure respectful treatment of visitors. This recommendation extends that requirement by focusing specifically on children, supporting a more welcoming environment for minors who frequently experience anxiety in correctional environments.
Background	Individual facilities have made improvements to their visitation spaces using child-friendly murals painted by incarcerated individuals and the availability of coloring materials, children's books, and activities made available by the facility staff and community donations. This has historically been limited by the availability of grant funding.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition

Department Position	The Department supports the recommendation to facilitate improvements to a child-friendly atmosphere within visitation settings. Many of these enhancements were already underway prior to the work group’s recommendation, reflecting the Department’s ongoing commitment to strengthening family connections and improving the overall visitation experience. On April 22, 2026, the Department issued a memo allowing for incarcerated individuals to retain one piece of their children’s artwork produced during visitation. Before the work group issued this recommendation, the Department already permitted a brief hug and kiss both before and after visits. To account for newly enacted Code requirements, Departmental policy was amended, effective July 1, 2026, to allow handholding. These changes were implemented proactively and in accordance with statutory changes to create a more supportive environment for children and families. To address any inconsistency in enforcement, the Department will issue a memorandum from the Deputy Director for Institutions reaffirming these allowances and ensuring staff across all facilities are fully informed and aligned with established procedure. In addition to these procedural changes, the Department, as indicated below, has agreed to reintroduce vending machines in visitation rooms and encouraging facilities to restore child-friendly activities such as games and coloring materials. To further refine these efforts, the Department will conduct a survey of wardens and superintendents to identify current child-focused activities and determine additional needs that could strengthen a child-friendly atmosphere statewide. It is important to note vending machines are operated through a contract with the Virginia Department of Blind and Vision Impaired. The contents of the vending machines are not controlled by the Department. The Department is currently working to develop and implement a visitor survey to gather direct input from visitors, including opportunities for feedback specifically aimed at improving the child-friendly environment within visitation spaces. Additionally, the Department is developing several focus groups to address recurring issues identified across the system. This topic
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	will be incorporated into those discussions to ensure a comprehensive examination of child-centered visitation practices. Throughout this effort, the Department will actively include perspectives from incarcerated individuals to ensure policies and practices are both effective and meaningful. The Department remains committed to fostering a welcoming, family-oriented visitation experience and will continue to advance improvements that support children, families, and positive engagement.
Implementation	Change in operating procedure
Timeline	The completion of all aspects of this recommendation will be completed in all facilities by July 2027 – a timeline recommended by the work group.
Progress	The Department has made meaningful progress in creating a more supportive and family-friendly visitation environment. The Department has already begun the process of reintroducing vending machines in visitation rooms and is currently discussing the provision of snack packs as an option that the commissary will offer for certain holidays that further enhance the experience for children and families. In addition, current operating procedures provide greater freedom for appropriate movement and affection during visits, ensuring interactions that better reflect healthy family connections.
Evaluation Criteria	Evaluation of the Department’s child-friendly visitation improvements will focus on gathering meaningful, direct feedback from those most impacted. Visitor surveys will serve as a key tool, allowing the Department to measure satisfaction with the visitation environment, identify areas for further enhancement, and assess whether activities and amenities meet families’ needs. In addition, warden surveys will help the Department evaluate consistency in implementation across facilities and highlight opportunities for expanded programming. Together, these inputs will provide a clear, data-informed picture of our progress and guide future improvements.

Intended Outcomes

These recommendations strengthen the overall quality of visitation by promoting more natural and rehabilitative interactions while maintaining appropriate security safeguards. Allowing controlled hand-on-hand movement and adjacent seating provides visitors with an experience that more closely resembles typical social interaction, which can enhance emotional connection, decrease stress, and improve the psychological well-being of both visitors and incarcerated individuals. These changes also reduce ambiguity for staff, enabling more consistent enforcement of policy and minimizing unnecessary corrective actions that can disrupt the visitation experience.

Developing a standardized training video ensures that staff receive clear, uniform instruction on permissible physical contact, cultural sensitivity, and child-friendly engagement, reinforcing professionalism and trauma-informed approaches. Studying improvements to child-friendly spaces directly supports healthier parent-child relationships and may reduce behavioral incidents by creating calmer, more welcoming environments.

Together, these enhancements contribute to a more positive visitation atmosphere that aligns with the Department's mission of supporting family reunification and rehabilitation. A more supportive visitation environment can also increase visitor satisfaction, improve compliance with visitation rules, reduce grievances, and foster stronger family bonds, which are key factors shown to improve institutional behavior and support successful reentry.

Goal Two – Implementing a feasible family visitation enhancement program that offers access to additional in-person visitation days and hours as achievable incentives while maintaining baseline levels of in-person visitation access to all prisoners and their loved ones

Issues Identified

COVID-19 significantly altered in-person visitation within the Department. Health and safety restrictions required a prolonged suspension of visits, leaving incarcerated individuals and their families without in-person contact for months. Even after visits resumed, capacity remained substantially reduced. In calendar year 2021, facilities recorded only 10,289 in-person visits, compared to 62,708 in calendar year 2025. Recognizing the need to expand access, Director Joseph Walters ordered a comprehensive review of all visiting room capacities in early 2026. As a result of this assessment, 162 additional tables were installed across facility visiting rooms to support increased visitation opportunities. In 2020, the Department worked diligently to further expand video visitation in direct response to COVID-19 precautions. This effort required an emergency contract with GTL – now known as ViaPath – to implement a visitation scheduling system. The scheduler not only increased access to video visits but also streamlined the visitation process for staff and visitors. Security was also improved by identifying individuals expected to enter the facility for in-person visitation. Video visitation usage grew significantly, rising from 149,010 visits in 2021 to 314,877 in 2025.

Visitation is offered from 8:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. on weekends and official state holidays. Because visitation requires increased staffing, extending hours beyond 4:45 p.m. is not feasible. The Department previously evaluated the possibility of increasing visitation blocks from two hours to three; however, doing so would significantly reduce the number of available time slots overall. The work group also discussed options such as extended visitation periods or incentive-based increases, but consensus could not be reached. The Department plans to revisit these ideas through upcoming focus groups with visitors and incarcerated individuals to better understand needs and potential impacts.

Work Group Recommendations

Recommendation 2.1 Study facility table capacity and the effects of changing visit-block lengths on throughput.	
Explanation	Currently, the number of available tables and the scheduling visit-block time lengths determine the total visitation capacity of a facility. The work group requested that the Department analyze how changing the length of visit-blocks would impact the total capacity and access at facilities. This analysis will provide data to determine whether operational changes to the standard length of scheduled visitation would reduce baseline access to visitation.
Background	The Department previously explored increasing visit-blocks from two hours to three hours. Internal evaluation determined that the increase of visit-blocks would reduce visitation availability and would not support the intended goal of enhanced visitation. Due to limitations of the scheduler, visit-blocks must be standard across all facilities. This means that if a facility regularly operates at full capacity under current scheduling practices, any increase in standard block times would mean a reduction in those facilities' overall access to regular in-person visitation.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	The Department will evaluate the total seating capacity of each facility with average rate of utilization. This will provide the Department with data to suggest whether increasing scheduler visit-block time lengths would create an overall decrease in visitation access or have no significant impact. Additionally, the Department will require wardens and superintendents to determine whether additional tables can be added to outside visiting areas to accommodate extended visits. A report will be provided to Department leadership with this data, and any equipment needs no later than December 1, 2026.
Timeline	December 1, 2026

Progress	The Department has completed its final review of facility visitation capacity inside the visitation rooms. The evaluation of potential outdoor space that can be incorporated in the total table capacity to increase access to extended visitation is ongoing.
Evaluation Criteria	N/A
Recommendation 2.2 Consider enhancements to family reunification day programs.	
Explanation	Family reunification days currently exist only in limited formats and are generally restricted to programs focused on parent–child bonding. This recommendation aims to extend similar post-completion celebrations to other appropriate programs. This would create additional incentives for participants to complete programming and expanding opportunities for meaningful family interaction beyond standard visitation. Broadening the range of programs that include a post-completion family celebration would increase the number of individuals eligible for these events and strengthen the motivational value of program completion.
Background	In the past, the Department hosted “Family Days” that allowed large numbers of family members to visit for a facility-wide outdoor celebration featuring food, games, and social activities. These events, however, presented significant security and logistical challenges due to the high number of participants and the difficulty staff faced in providing adequate supervision. This resulted in an increased number of disciplinary incidents. Currently, only select parental programs offer family reunification events as an incentive for program completion, during which family members are invited to the facility to celebrate the participant’s achievement.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support

Implementation	The Department will conduct a review to identify programs that are appropriate for offering a family celebration event as an incentive for successful completion. Following this review, program managers will develop implementation plans for these celebrations in coordination with facility security staff.
Timeline	July 1, 2027
Progress	The Department is currently planning to hold “Daddy Daughter Dances” at several facilities as a part of designated parental programming. Additional mother/child events will also be planned.
Evaluation Criteria	N/A

Intended Outcomes

The recommended actions substantially enhance the accessibility, reliability, and rehabilitative value of the Department’s visitation program. By conducting a systematic review of table capacity, seating configurations, and the impact of varying block lengths, the Department can better understand institution-specific limitations and identify practical opportunities to increase throughput without compromising baseline access. This approach ensures that any changes such as adjusting visit durations or reconfiguring space are grounded in operational realities and tailored to the needs of each facility.

Expanding access to family reunification events further strengthens the Department’s commitment to supporting parent-child relationships and broader family stability. These structured events provide opportunities for deeper interaction than standard visitation allows, enabling families to reconnect in a setting that supports emotional healing and reduces the strain of separation. When paired with expanded access and optimized scheduling – such as programmatic enhancements – the Department is promoting sustained engagement, encouraging positive behavior, and contributing to successful reentry planning.

Collectively, these improvements increase the availability of meaningful visitation opportunities, reduce scheduling barriers for families with long travel distances or limited availability, and align visitation operations more closely with the Department’s mission of fostering family reunification and rehabilitation while maintaining facility safety and operational integrity.

Goal Three – Extended Meals with Families During Holiday Visitation

Issues Identified

During the examination of holiday visitation practices, the work group identified several challenges limiting the ability of families to share meaningful experiences during these important occasions. Historically, visitation rooms included vending machines stocked with security approved snacks and simple meal items, providing visitors and incarcerated individuals with the opportunity to share refreshments during visitation. These machines were removed during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce surface contact and prevent further spread of the virus. Their removal also coincided with heightened contraband concerns, as some facilities observed attempts to pass prohibited items through food packaging.

With the elimination of vending options and the longstanding policy prohibiting outside food from entering secure areas, families are currently unable to share meals during visitation including during expanded visitation on holidays. The work group emphasized that holiday visits often carry deep emotional weight and that the inability to share even simple food items diminishes the potential for comfort, connection, and normalcy during these limited interactions.

To address this challenge, the work group considered several approaches that would allow families to share meals safely. This included offering facility prepared holiday meals, selling holiday commissary packs, or providing pre-approved external meals purchased in advance. Each option would require different security and operational considerations depending on the facility's size, infrastructure, and security level. As a result, members concluded that piloting multiple models would allow institutions to evaluate which option best aligns with their operational capacity and security requirements, enabling flexible statewide implementation.

Work Group Recommendations

Recommendation 3.1 Reintroduce vending machines with security approved foods.	
Explanation	This expands options for visitors and supports longer visit durations by improving the comfort and experience of visitation.
Background	The Department ceased access to vending machines due to COVID-19 restrictions and usage was not reauthorized due to security concerns related to the passing of contraband in food packaging.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	The Department has issued guidance to facilities to contact vendors to reintroduce vending machines by December 1, 2026.
Timeline	December 1, 2026
Progress	In progress
Evaluation Criteria	N/A
Recommendation 3.2 Pilot special holiday meal options at selected facilities and solicit feedback for program evaluation.	
Explanation	Introducing controlled, pre-approved meal options including commissary snack packs, facility-prepared meals, or external vendor meals creates opportunities for meaningful family interaction around shared traditions. Structured evaluation will ensure that holiday meal programs maximize positive outcomes while mitigating any operational risks.
Background	The work group agreed that rather than having individuals earn extended time to share a meal with visitors, they did not want incentive-based options, but rather, consistent options.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition

Department Position	Support
Implementation	Change in operating procedure
Timeline	At the request of the work group, a report of this pilot will be submitted as follow up to this report by July 15, 2027.
Progress	The Department has already begun discussions with the commissary vendor to implement holiday commissary packs, which are targeted to be available for purchase at all facilities beginning Thanksgiving weekend 2026.
Evaluation Criteria	N/A

Intended Outcomes

The recommended measures significantly enhance the emotional, social, and rehabilitative value of holiday visitation by reintroducing opportunities for families to share food which is a central component of many cultural and family traditions. Allowing incarcerated individuals and their loved ones to enjoy a simple snack or participate in holiday-specific meal offerings creates moments of normalcy that reinforce family identity, reduce the stress associated with incarceration, and strengthen bonds critical for successful reentry.

Reintroducing vending machines improves comfort during routine visits and reduces interruptions caused by hunger or fatigue, particularly for children. Pilot programs offering commissary packs, facility prepared meals, or preapproved external food options provide a responsible, security conscious method for reintroducing shared meals in a controlled environment. By piloting multiple approaches, the Department can identify operationally feasible models tailored to each facility's security level and resource capacity.

Collectively, these improvements create a warmer, more supportive visitation environment while preserving the integrity of security operations. The result is a visitation experience that better reflects the Department's commitment to rehabilitation, family reunification, and trauma informed practices ultimately supporting positive institutional behavior and strengthening the connections essential for post release success.

Goal Four - Additional Visitation Access for Minor and Infrequent Visitors

Issues Identified

During the review of visitation access for minor and infrequent visitors, several operational and communication challenges were identified. The work group emphasized that the current special visit policy, while designed to accommodate exceptional circumstances, does not adequately meet the needs of children or families who visit less frequently due to distance, cost, or personal constraints. Some stakeholders reported that they were unaware special visits existed, did not understand eligibility criteria, and lacked clear guidance on how to request them. This has resulted in inconsistent access and unnecessary barriers for those most in need of flexibility.

The work group also examined historic practices around extended visits for long-distance travelers. Previously, extended visits were available to individuals traveling more than 500 miles. New statutory changes under HB173 reduced this threshold to 150 miles, reflecting recognition that significant travel burdens exist for many families, not only those traveling far distances. Initial discussions explored creating a distinct extended visit category for children and infrequent visitors; however, limitations within the current visitation scheduler made implementing a separate visit type impractical. Members therefore determined that expanding eligibility within the existing special visit framework would provide a more efficient and equitable solution.

Several participants noted that minors face unique developmental and emotional needs that are not always accommodated under the standard visitation model. Infrequent visitors, including those who have not visited within 90 days, likewise experience challenges reconnecting due to limited availability and scheduling constraints. Together, these issues highlight the need for clearer policies, more accessible scheduling options, and improved communication to ensure that vulnerable visitor groups receive adequate support.

Work Group Recommendations

Recommendation 4.1	
Expand eligibility for special visits to children and infrequent visitors (90 days since last visit).	
Explanation	This expansion recognizes the unique hardship faced by infrequent visitors (often due to distance, cost, or work schedules) and the developmental needs of children maintaining relationships with incarcerated parents. Limitations within the visitation scheduler do not allow for varying categories of visitors to be identified or for scheduling blocks to be extended, resulting in the need for minors and infrequent visitors to be handled through the special visit process to receive extended visits for these circumstances.
Background	As of September 12, 2026, there were 176,158 approved visitors. Data regarding the number of infrequent or long-distance visitors is unavailable due to data collection limitations within the visitation scheduler.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	Clarification in operating procedures to specifically states that special visits include minors, infrequent, and long-distance visitors.
Timeline	By December 1, 2026, policy will be updated to reflect the new and clarifying language.
Progress	In process
Evaluation Criteria	N/A
Recommendation 4.2	
Allow special visits on weekdays and permit monthly requests.	
Explanation	This recommendation establishes predictable access pathways, reduces barriers created by weekend-only approval practices, and updates policy to reflect procedures already commonly followed by facility leadership.
Background	Currently, policy allows the Facility Unit Head or designee to grant special visits for immediate family members based on special need or exceptional circumstances, such as when an immediate family member has unexpectedly traveled 150 miles or

	more, or when an incarcerated individual's death is imminent. Policy specifies that these visits should occur during normal visitation days, except in cases where death is imminent. However, in practice, many facilities have permitted such visits to take place on weekdays. Additionally, limitations within the visitation scheduler require special visits to be arranged outside of the standard scheduling system.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	Policy language will be revised to allow special visits to occur on weekdays and allow special visits to be requested monthly. These visits will be scheduled for an extended duration, subject to available space and security requirements.
Timeline	By December 1, 2026, policy will be updated to reflect the new and clarifying language.
Progress	In process
Evaluation Criteria	N/A
Recommendation 4.3 Update visitation brochure to clarify special visit information.	
Explanation	Clear written guidance ensures that visitors understand requirements and processes, reducing confusion and missed opportunities for family contact.
Background	Special visits are handled at the institutional level, and no formal reporting mechanism has historically existed.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	A new brochure highlighting the special visit request process, to include eligibility requirements and expectations, will be created.
Timeline	The brochure will be completed and attached to policy no later than December 1, 2026. The brochure will also be available on the Department's website.
Progress	In process
Evaluation Criteria	N/A

Intended Outcomes

The recommended changes significantly improve the accessibility, equity, and rehabilitative value of the visitation program for minors and infrequent visitors. By expanding eligibility for special visits to these groups, the Department strengthens opportunities for meaningful contact, particularly for children who benefit greatly from consistent interaction with their incarcerated parent. Allowing weekday availability and monthly scheduling provides families with predictable, flexible pathways to request additional visitation time, reducing the barriers posed by weekend limitations and travel constraints.

Updating the visitation brochure and associated communication materials will ensure that visitors understand eligibility criteria and how to request special visits, thereby reducing confusion, increasing utilization, and promoting a more transparent system. These enhancements advance the Department's mission by supporting family reunification, reducing the strain associated with long absences, and fostering emotional stability for both incarcerated individuals and their loved ones.

Collectively, the improvements help create a more welcoming and inclusive visitation environment, address inequities experienced by families facing distance or financial challenges and contribute to positive institutional outcomes by reinforcing family support networks essential for successful reentry.

Goal Five - Return In-Person Visitation to 2019 Levels

Issues Identified

Throughout the work group's review of statewide visitation practices, stakeholders reported perceiving a noticeable difference between current visitation levels and those experienced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many visitors recalled visitation rooms being consistently full before 2020, with a lively atmosphere that contributed to a sense of community and meaningful family connection. In contrast, they observed that in-person visitation appears more limited today, contributing to a perceived decline in visitation "quality".

Staff and administrators explained that these perceptions must be understood within the broader context of operational changes and the evolution of visitation practices. Prior to COVID-19, facilities relied on a first come, first served approach that produced visibly fuller visitation rooms but also resulted in extended wait times, overcrowded lobbies, and instances where visitors waited for hours only to discover time or space had run out. COVID-19 precautions required the Department to significantly reduce the number of tables allowed in the visitation room; each table had to be at least 6 feet apart. Additionally, the duration of visits was limited to one hour with thirty minutes in between to allow for appropriate sanitation (on June 22, 2022, the length of visitation changed to two hours per visit. The break in between visits was changed from thirty minutes to fifteen minutes).

To increase accessibility of video visitation and advance notice of visitors coming into the facilities, the Department entered into an emergency contract with GTL, now known as ViaPath, for a visitation scheduler. The introduction of the visitation scheduler created a more organized process by eliminating wait times, increasing predictability, and improving security by allowing staff to know in advance which approved visitors would arrive. Due to the emergency nature of the contract, the scheduler was not customizable, meaning the data collected is limited. Available data includes the number of scheduled visits, both in-person and video by facility, the number of cancelled visits by facility and the total number of approved or rejected visitors. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, visitation data was not consistently collected and should not be utilized to inform decision making as it is incomplete.

Stakeholders also noted the growing prevalence of video visitation, which was minimally used before the pandemic but now accounts for a significant percentage of total visitation. Much like trends seen in the broader community, virtual contact has become a convenient and widely used method of communication, reducing pressure on in-person visitation and contributing to the observed differences in visitation room occupancy. In calendar year 2021, 149,010 video visits were scheduled compared to 314,877 in calendar year 2025.

Importantly, the Department highlighted that visitation room usage varies considerably across facilities. Some visitation rooms are consistently full every weekend, reflecting factors such as proximity to population centers, family access to transportation, and security level. These natural variations indicate that the perception of declining visitation is not uniform across the system and

must be evaluated through standardized, facility specific data. It is important to note that in February 2026, the Department began to evaluate the ability to add additional tables to the visiting rooms. As a result, 162 new tables were added to increase access to in-person visitation.

Stakeholders also emphasized that returning visitation to 2019 levels would involve addressing several experiential components such as reinstating picture ticket programs and assessing whether the use of visitation jumpsuits affects the perceived normalcy of the visit. While security requirements necessitate jumpsuit usage, stakeholders noted that anything enhancing dignity and comfort may encourage more families to resume regular in-person visitation.

Work Group Recommendations

Recommendation 5.1	
Enhance visitation data collection and report on percentage of scheduled vs. completed visits.	
Explanation	Improved data will allow the Department to identify bottlenecks and implement targeted adjustments to restore visitation capacity to pre-pandemic levels.
Background	The Department acknowledges that current visitation data is limited and, in some areas, incomplete. Existing data systems do not consistently capture the full range of information needed to accurately assess visitation trends, capacity, or utilization across facilities. As a result, while the Department maintains certain baseline metrics, the scope, consistency, and reliability of available data are not yet sufficient to fully support the level of analysis desired by stakeholders or required for optimal decision-making. The Department is committed to strengthening these systems so that future policy, operational adjustments, and resource planning can be supported by comprehensive, accurate, and actionable visitation data.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	The Department is committed to gathering and reviewing robust visitation data across all facilities, as this information is essential to making informed decisions, promoting transparency, and ensuring that visitation policies align with family-centered and security-driven objectives. As recommended by the work group, and in anticipation of a RFP for a new, customizable visitation scheduler, we pledge to incorporate requests for the following datasets into the RFP, with the goal of making the following information publicly available, sorted by facility, by month: 1. Number of incarcerated individuals receiving visits 2. Number of visitors per visit 3. Number of visits denied, delineated by reason for denial 4. Number of visits reserved but unattended 5. Number of special visits scheduled and attended, delineated by purpose
Implementation	The Department is currently drafting an RFP for a new scheduling platform. Based on the recommendations from the work group and

	the conversations we have had as a Department, the RFP will explicitly require that the selected system capture and report all relevant visitation metrics necessary for operational analysis, transparency, and continuous improvement. As part of this procurement, the Department will engage in good-faith negotiations with all qualified vendors to ensure the resulting system meets the Department's technical needs, supports long-term scalability, and allows comprehensive data tracking to guide informed policy and operational decisions.
Timeline	The Department will begin tracking all visitation-related data identified no later than July 1, 2027, as recommended by the work group. This timeline may be adjusted only if delays occur in executing a contract with a new vendor responsible for the Department's visitation scheduling system.
Progress	RFP requirements are currently being developed, to include those requested by the work group.
Evaluation Criteria	N/A
Recommendation 5.2 Focus on improving "quality of visitation" by implementing all prior recommendations.	
Explanation	Quality improvements including expanded physical affection, seating changes, child friendly enhancements, and holiday meal pilots which all support higher completion rates and more meaningful visits.
Background	Currently, all visitors can hold hands and engage in a brief hug and kiss at the beginning and end of each visit. Visitation rooms maintain varying types of activities for children, to include games, books, crossword puzzles and coloring pages. Meals are not provided.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	To support a focus on improving the quality of visitation, the Department plans to conduct focus groups with visitors and the incarcerated population. These focus groups will take place in varying regions and security level facilities.

Timeline	The Department will pilot holiday meal options where incarcerated individuals may earn the chance to have extended time eating with visitors on holidays and report back to the legislature by November 1, 2027, regarding the feedback provided from visitors and incarcerated individuals, benefits and problems reported by facilities and staff, any contraband found during those pilots, and any relevant logistical assessment of further expansion. At least one facility per region will pilot such options at least twice by August 1, 2027.
Progress	Initial planning phase
Evaluation Criteria	Survey incarcerated individuals and family members to determine experience and feedback related to the pilot. We will also seek feedback from facility staff and leadership as to the success or needed improvements.
Recommendation 5.3 Resume selling picture tickets and allow appropriate physical contact during photos.	
Explanation	Picture programs are important for maintaining long-term family ties and providing parents with keepsakes shared with children and loved ones.
Background (i.e. data)	The Department suspended the picture program in 2020 due to COVID-19 precautions.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	Support
Implementation	The Department has already resumed selling picture tickets. This was executed via an executive memorandum from the Deputy Director for Institutions with an effective date of September 8, 2026. The video we are developing for training staff as recommended under Goal 1, Recommendation 1-1, will include depictions of appropriate physical contact during photos.
Timeline	Training video will be filmed by November 1, 2026, with all security staff and facility leadership viewing the video by January 1, 2027.
Progress	Initial planning phase
Evaluation Criteria	N/A

Recommendation 5.4 Consider allowing “blues” instead of visitation jumpsuits.	
Explanation	Current Department policy requires incarcerated individuals housed in security level two and above to wear specialized, pocket free, reverse zipper visitation jumpsuits during in-person visitation. Work group stakeholders external to the Department expressed that permitting the use of standard issue incarcerated individual clothing (“blues”), where appropriate, could enhance the dignity and perceived normalcy of the visitation experience for incarcerated individuals and their families. However, Department staff did not endorse this proposal due to ongoing and significant security concerns. The Department reports that visitation jumpsuits have demonstrated effectiveness as part of its comprehensive security strategy to prevent the introduction of contraband into secure facilities. Removal of this requirement could increase the risk of contraband entry, thereby jeopardizing the safety of both incarcerated individuals and staff.
Background (i.e. data)	Department policy requires incarcerated individuals in security level two and above facilities to change into reverse-zipper jumpsuits after completing their strip search and before entering the visitation room, as a measure to prevent the introduction of contraband. The jumpsuits also serve as a deterrent against contraband that could be passed during visitation, as individuals are unable to conceal items on their person. Indiana and Washington state likewise employ this practice as part of their visitation procedures.
Source	Work group
Work Group Consensus	No voiced opposition
Department Position	The Department is unable to support this recommendation. Visitation jumpsuits remain an essential and proven security measure within the Department’s efforts to mitigate contraband risks and discontinuing their use could undermine institutional safety.
Implementation	N/A
Timeline	N/A

Progress	N/A
Evaluation Criteria	N/A

Intended Outcomes

The work group recommendations support a strategic, data driven effort to restore and stabilize in-person visitation levels while strengthening the emotional and rehabilitative value of each visit. Establishing consistent statewide metrics including reporting the percentage of scheduled versus completed visits will provide clearer insight into facility specific trends, natural variations in demand, and the impact of location, security level, and population characteristics on visitation room utilization. This allows the Department to identify and address barriers in facilities with lower utilization, while recognizing that high traffic institutions may require additional resources or operational adjustments.

Implementing earlier quality focused recommendations such as more flexible seating arrangements, handholding, child-friendly enhancements, and holiday meal pilots will create a more welcoming and normalized visitation environment, support family engagement and improve visitor satisfaction. Reinstating picture tickets adds an important family-centered tradition that strengthens emotional bonds and provides lasting physical reminders of positive connections.

By balancing security needs with evidence-based practices that support family reunification, these improvements help build a visitation environment that encourages consistent participation, reduces logistical barriers, and promotes healthy social interaction. Collectively, these measures increase accessibility, enhance the holistic quality of the visitation experience, and position the Department to achieve sustainable, pre-pandemic visitation levels across diverse facilities while preserving safety, dignity, and operational integrity.

Conclusion

The work group's efforts affirmed that meaningful family contact is an essential component of the Department's rehabilitative mission and a critical factor supporting emotional stability, prosocial behavior, and long-term reentry success. Across all five goals, stakeholders, advocates, and Department staff consistently emphasized the need to modernize visitation practices in ways that preserve security while expanding opportunities for safe, dignified, and family-centered engagement.

The recommendations developed through this collaborative process reflect a balanced integration of stakeholder perspectives, operational realities, and evidence based correctional practice. Each goal area contributes to a holistic framework: improving physical affection standards to support healthy bonding; reassessing visitation scheduling and capacity to ensure equitable access; reintroducing shared meals on holidays to strengthen family identity; expanding special-visit eligibility for minors and infrequent visitors; and restoring in-person visitation levels through enhanced data collection, improved visitation environments, and more consistent institutional practices. Together, these actions create a foundation for a more responsive visitation system that is aligned with the needs of families, the safety requirements of institutions, and the rehabilitative objectives of the Department.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Across all five statutory goals, several overarching themes emerged consistently throughout stakeholder discussions and Department analysis. These cross-cutting themes reflect shared priorities and provide a unified framework for understanding the recommendations developed herein.

- 1. Family Engagement as a Rehabilitative Priority:** Stakeholders articulated that visitation is not merely a social privilege but a cornerstone of rehabilitation and long-term stability. All enhancements recommended aim to strengthen healthy relationships and support positive behavior.
- 2. Consistency Paired with Flexibility:** While institutions must maintain clear, uniform standards, flexibility is needed to account for diverse facility layouts, security levels, geographic locations, cultural needs, and visitor demographics.
- 3. Improved Communication and Transparency:** Clearer written materials, better public facing information, and consistent staff training are essential to ensure visitors understand the policies, processes, and opportunities available to them.
- 4. Balanced Modernization:** The Department's efforts to expand handholding, child friendly spaces, and special visit eligibility demonstrate modernization of visitation practices while maintaining strong security measures such as approved visitor applications, controlled entry procedures, and the continued use of visitation jumpsuits.

5. **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Enhanced data collection including around completed vs. scheduled visits will allow the Department to target improvements, accurately diagnose capacity issues, and adjust practices to better meet statewide family engagement goals.

Response to Additional Stakeholder Requirements

Following circulation of the draft report, stakeholders submitted additional conceptual recommendations related to the creation of new goals and expanded oversight structures for future visitation policy changes.

The Department appreciates the thoughtfulness and intent behind these proposals. However, the enabling legislation – Chapter 571 of the 2026 Acts of Assembly – prescribes the specific goals that the work group is authorized to address. As such, the Department is not permitted to add new goals or expand the scope of the report beyond the statutory directives established by the General Assembly.

Additionally, the work group elected not to reconvene for a second session unless new information emerged that warranted further discussion. Because the statutory reporting deadline requires submission of the final report by October 1, 2026, the Department is unable to incorporate new recommendations requiring additional deliberation into this report.

The Department recognizes the importance of ongoing dialogue between families, stakeholders, and Department leadership. While we cannot create new statutory goals within this report or adopt oversight mechanisms beyond the scope permitted by current law, we commit to structured, ongoing engagement efforts outside of the Chapter 571 process. To that end, the Department will incorporate several of the underlying concepts raised by stakeholders into its broader visitation improvement strategy:

1. **Creation of an Ongoing Advisory Structure:** As part of planned focus-group development, the Department will establish standing opportunities through which stakeholders can share trends, concerns, and system wide observations regarding visitation practices.
2. **Tele-Town Hall Meetings on Visitation:** To promote accessibility for visitors statewide, the Department is considering hosting virtual forums where visitors, advocacy groups, and interested parties may raise questions, identify recurring concerns, and offer recommendations.
3. **Facility Level Engagement:** The Department cannot require quarterly in-person stakeholder meetings without statutory direction or a feasibility review, but facility leadership will be encouraged to offer opportunities—virtual or in-person—for visitors to share feedback on visitation concerns.
4. **Integration with Policy Review:** Input gathered through ongoing outreach will be incorporated into internal review processes as the Department continues to refine

policies, assess operational changes, and evaluate the impact of the forthcoming visitation scheduling system.

These commitments allow the Department to honor the spirit of the stakeholders' request – ensuring continued dialogue, transparency, and community engagement – while adhering to statutory limits and respecting the scope and timeline of the work group as established by the General Assembly.

