January 21, 2021

Senator André Jacque  
Senator Joan Ballweg  
Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families  

Re: SB8, Relating to: distribution of COVID-19 vaccines  

Dear Chairpersons:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this correspondence related to the proposed bill SB 8 that is being heard in the Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families on Thursday, January 21, 2021. The Department of Corrections (DOC) is providing this correspondence for information only.

The unprecedented global pandemic has affected every corner of our lives. The DOC is no different. Since March 2020, we have been working diligently to slow the spread of COVID-19 within our facilities. Following the guidance from the Department of Health Services (DHS), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), we’ve made significant operational changes, and I invite you to visit our website that offers much more detail about those changes: www.doc.wi.gov/covid19. We’ve activated our Emergency Operations Center and all facilities have implemented pandemic plans. We’ve conducted mass testing multiple times at all of our institutions, and have supplied PPE to all staff and persons in our care. Since last year, I have met weekly with my counterparts in the Midwest to share best practices and discuss challenges in mitigating COVID-19 within our facilities. However, as the cases of the novel virus surged across our State, despite our efforts, our facilities were no exception to that trend.

Within our 36 secure adult facilities operating 24/7/365, we house nearly 20,000 people and employee more than 7,000 dedicated state employees. Science shows that people in the high-risk category who are mostly likely to experience severe symptoms, including death from COVID-19 include older people and those with other underlying health conditions. Many of the people in our care fall into the high-risk category.

Additionally, science has found the best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to avoid being exposed to the virus through social distancing and wearing a mask. While we have provided PPE to all persons in our care and staff, and instituted mask guidelines within our facilities, social distancing is a challenge in our secure facilities. Many DOC facilities were designed for congregate or dormitory-style living, some even housing two people to a cell. This design makes it extremely difficult to practice social
distancing and manage a highly-contagious virus. As such, persons in our care face an increased risk of infection compared to the general public.

We will continue working with our partners in public health and the DHS, and as we have throughout this pandemic, we will continue to prioritize the safety and well-being of those in our care and our staff. We are prepared to administer vaccines to individuals in our facilities as quickly as possible. Our health services and corrections staff live in the communities surrounding our institutions across Wisconsin, and the vaccination process will reduce overall risk, not only the people in our care, but the communities across our state where our staff reside and reentering individuals return.

If you have questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to reach out to my Legislative Advisor, Paulina de Haan, at 608-843-0482 or via email at paulina.dehaan@wisconsin.gov.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kevin A. Carr
Secretary