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OPI records: Investigation underway into cheating on tests at Shelby prison

Academic testing for inmates at the Shelby prison was shut down in April and has been "suspended indefinitely" pending results of an investigation into allegations a test administrator helped inmates cheat to get their high school equivalency, according to records from the Office of Public Instruction. A private company, CoreCivic, runs the state prison in Shelby, the Crossroads Correctional Center. It houses 758 male inmates, according to a Department of Corrections data dashboard. The testing program, HiSET, allows adults without a high school diploma to earn the equivalent of a high school degree. An email from OPI in response to a records request by the Daily Montanan notes testing was suspended at the prison on April 13 immediately following "a very serious accusation" of cheating. "A former inmate at Crossroads claims he witnessed cheating and plagiarism, watched a test administrator change tester answers to correct them, and numerous students be given essay questions in advance so someone else could write the essays," said the email from OPI's HiSET administrator to recipients including CoreCivic staff. "He specifically references score ranges obtained and an estimated number of inmates who received the HiSET credential that should not have." A June 7 letter from CoreCivic to the Department of Corrections said CoreCivic would cooperate with the investigation and would continue to deliver educational programs to inmates so they could participate in testing once it resumes. In the letter, CoreCivic's David Berkebile said the private prison management company aims to continue to meet programming needs at the prison. "We understand the Department's concerns surrounding the recent allegation to OPI about HiSET test administration processes at the facility, and CoreCivic will cooperate fully with OPI throughout the course of their investigation, report submission, and any needed corrective action period," wrote Berkebile, managing director of operations. "Please allow this letter to reiterate CoreCivic's ongoing commitment to provide meaningful education opportunities to those in our care." In a separate email provided to the Daily Montanan in response to the records request, the OPI HiSET administrator noted the status of the prison as a designated testing site is up in the air. ButCarolynn Bright, communications director for the DOC, said Tuesday access to HiSET is critical as former inmates return to the workforce. "Approximately 96 percent of all posted jobs require a high school diploma or equivalent," Bright said in an email. "For the justice-involved, not having this level of education when they return to the community leads to public health and safety issues, along with recidivism. Attaining a high school diploma or HiSET is key to this population's future success." The number of inmates affected was not clear Tuesday. CoreCivic director of public affairs Ryan Gustin said one inmate at Crossroads has one subtest remaining to complete the HiSET curriculum. "Beyond this individual, it would be difficult to determine how many other individuals would be 'test ready' and otherwise unable to test since April 13," Gustin said in an email. In an email to the Daily Montanan, OPI spokesperson Brian O'Leary said HiSET is conducting an investigation into testing integrity at the prison, but OPI is not privy to the exact status of the investigation. Records indicate the investigation by the Office of Test Integrity at ETS, a private educational testing and measurement organization that offers HiSET, should be complete in July. An April email from prison warden Pete Bludworth to OPI acknowledged the request to stop testing and also pledged cooperation: "The staff of the Crossroads Correctional Center are committed to the highest standards of integrity in our programs and services, and will fully cooperate with the investigation." In response to a question from CoreCivic, OPI noted in an email on April 28 the status of the facility as a testing site was in question: "Depending on the outcome of the investigation and actions required as a result, ongoing HiSET test center designation at this point is unknown." In a phone call, ETS directed questions about test center designations back to the state of Montana. In an email provided in response to the Daily Montanan's records request, OPI's HiSET administrator told CoreCivic the state will need to "identify appropriate actions steps after the investigation is concluded at HiSET." In a statement provided by O'Leary, Superintendent of Public Instruction Elsie Arntzen said the following about the suspension: "The focus is on lifelong learners where and whoever they are. It's never about a single test, it's about learning towards the next step."