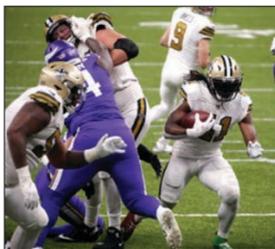


WASECA COUNTY NEWS



**OPIOIDS
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**VIKINGS SEEK
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Thursday

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Waseca-Le Sueur Regional Library System eliminates fines and late fees in 2021

By BAILEY GRUBISH
bailey.grubish@apgsomn.com

The Waseca-Le Sueur Regional Library System will no longer charge fines or late fees on items.

Beginning in 2021, all fines and charges will be removed from patrons' accounts and no new fines will be given.

The library is eliminating fees and fines to remove the financial barrier that keeps some community members from using the resources the libraries have to offer. By taking away the fines and fees, the libraries are open to more patrons to use.

"Staff are excited that the Library Board voted to eliminate late fines starting in 2021. This is a big step forward to opening up our libraries' collections and services to more of our community members," Library Director Stacy Lienemann said in a press release. "Over 2,000 of our patrons were blocked because of late fines over \$20. Some of these late fines were accrued years ago, when the patron was a child. Now we welcome these patrons back to access all we offer, from books to hotspots and everything in between."

Fines and fees are a thing of the past for the Waseca-Le Sueur Regional Library System, but if the library doesn't receive its items back a bill will be sent to that patron. If the items are returned after the bill is sent out, the bill will be deleted off of the person's account.

As a courtesy the library employees will send out a renewal or return reminder three days before the item is due back, then at 21 days an overdue notice will be sent out and at 35 days late, the person will be billed.

This is a way for the libraries to ensure that its items are returned.

According to the Waseca-Le Sueur Library System website, studies show that late fees don't have a significant impact on getting people to abide by the return dates and that people stop using the libraries instead. Other libraries have reported an increase in return rates when fees are removed.

The library system will continue to monitor how the removal of fines is affecting the library overall.

Fees and fines bring minimal revenue to the library and, according to the library, will not affect the library system's collections and services.

In 2019, the library system collected \$2,600 in late fines.

The current budget ensures the library system can maintain its current support, collections and services and it is fiscally responsible to eliminate fines because of the electronic materials available that do not accrue late fines.

See LIBRARY on 3A



The Federal Correctional Institution in Waseca. (Photo courtesy of FCI-Waseca)

PRISON OFFICIALS DENY LAWSUIT ALLEGATIONS

Waseca prison officials say inmates had adequate care

By BAILEY GRUBISH AND
LISA KACZKE
bailey.grubish@apgsomn.com

Officials at the Federal Correctional Institution in Waseca are denying a lawsuit's allegations that they didn't prevent the spread of COVID-19 and provide adequate healthcare for inmates ill with the virus.

Prison staff "worked very hard" to address the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and took implementing the COVID-19 action plan seriously, according to Assistant Warden Regina Kallis.

"I am aware that (the inmates) allege that FCI-Waseca did not sufficiently address their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not the case," Kallis wrote in a declaration filed in court Monday, Dec. 28.

The ACLU filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court Dec. 9 on behalf of 14 inmates at FCI-Waseca. The lawsuit is filed against Michael Carvajal, director of the Bureau of Prisons, and FCI-Waseca Warden M. Starr.

Nearly 70% of the inmates had COVID-19 in an outbreak that began when inmates who had COVID-19 were transferred into the prison on Aug. 18, according to the ACLU's lawsuit. However, Kallis wrote that federal law requires inmates to be assigned to a correctional facility.

"The facility cannot simply decline to transfer new inmates into the facility," according to Kallis.

In total, 75% of the inmates and 20% of the staff at FCI-Waseca have had COVID-19, according to Tara Wiczorek, the health services administrator who oversees the health team at FCI-Waseca.

The COVID-19 cases this fall were "extremely difficult," but the current number of COVID-19 cases "portray a more optimistic picture," according to Kallis. As of Tuesday, 12 inmates and two staff at FCI-Waseca had COVID-19, according to the Bureau of Prisons.

The ACLU is alleging in its lawsuit that the prison violated the inmates' 8th Amendment right to "humane conditions of confinement" and the Rehabilitation Act that prohibits discrimination

against individuals with a disability in federal programs.

U.S. Attorney Erica MacDonald, representing Carvajal and Starr, is requesting that the lawsuit be dismissed and the temporary restraining order be denied. MacDonald alleges that the ACLU won't be successful in its lawsuit because the court doesn't have jurisdiction over the Bureau of Prisons' decisions regarding home confinement. In addition, the inmates have either recovered from COVID-19 or not contracted it, and FCI-Waseca is slated to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in January, according to MacDonald. Additionally, the inmates don't meet the standard set by the 8th Amendment and aren't likely to prevail on their Rehabilitation Act claim, according to MacDonald's memo response to the restraining order request.

Prison officials filed declarations in court on Monday outlining their actions during the COVID-19 pandemic along with a couple dozen documents detailing the inmates' medical care, although some of them are sealed

or redacted. The publicly available exhibits also include correspondence regarding the inmates' requests for compassionate release to home confinement.

The ACLU is seeking an emergency order requiring that the most medically vulnerable inmates be transferred to home confinement; the immediate implementation of social distancing and hygiene measures; and adequate medical care for inmates who have COVID-19. The ACLU is also requesting a temporary restraining order directing the prison to immediately implement and enforce social distancing, quarantine and hygiene measures and to appoint an independent monitor with medical expertise to ensure compliance.

A hearing on the restraining order request is scheduled for Jan. 6.

In addition to "significant changes to every aspect" of the prison's operations to keep staff and inmates safe, 55 inmates were released from FCI-Waseca to home confinement, according to Kallis.

See PRISON on 3A

Les Tlougan reflects on his time served on Waseca City Council



Les Tlougan, of the Waseca HPC and council, Joan Mooney, of the Waseca County Historical Society and HPC, and consultant Molly Patterson comb over documents during the application development process to gain historic status for Waseca's downtown in 2019, which has since been established. Tlougan, along with others, have dedicated many years to the HPC and obtaining this status. (County file photo)

By BAILEY GRUBISH
bailey.grubish@apgsomn.com

Les Tlougan dedicated the last 12 years to the Waseca City Council, bringing knowledge, experience and passion to his position.

In 2008, Tlougan ran for the city council to address issues on his mind and those that he learned about through doorknocking around town. Although his time serving the community on the city council is coming to an end, he'll continue to be present in the community through the library boards, the Marching Classic and being an election judge. People will still see him riding around town on his bicycle.

"I've never done stuff for personal glory," Tlougan said. "I don't care who takes responsibility, if we've gone from here to here and got something done, that's all I care about."

Once elected, he immediately wanted to improve the organization of council agendas

and the long-term planning for the city.

"When I was elected, I had kind of determined that I wanted to be on for two terms, if I was re-elected, because you get pieces in place, but I knew in four years we would just be getting a good start and would really be rolling on it yet," Tlougan said. "Then I wasn't going to go a third term and I decided to do a third term, because there were some other things that I wanted... And we were getting to that point and I wanted to keep it moving."

Once Tlougan took his seat on the council, he worked with the other council members to implement more organized council agendas, which meant adding an announcement and board of commissions section.

The other thing he worked on right away was implementing better long term planning for Waseca and what that would look like.

"Those two things alone were fixed within the first couple of years I was on council and it wasn't just me, as a council we made

that conscious decision that we needed to look down the road," Tlougan said.

For Tlougan some of the long term planning meant adding bike paths, bike trails, bike lanes, sidewalks, parks, playgrounds and other amenities to the community. He said that he read about different towns and how they are attracting younger families and from this research it was determined that these amenities are a part of the draw to town.

Another long term planning item the council has been working on is the flooding issues in the city and how to address sanitary and sewer issues.

Since 2016, the city has put a emphasis on trying to find ways to mitigate the sewer problem and plans to work on that for the future time, according to Tlougan.

See TLOUGAN on 3A

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