

2024 Legislative Report: Healthy Start Act



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Background

In May 2021, the Minnesota Legislature granted the Department of Corrections (DOC) Commissioner the authority to conditionally release pregnant and recently post-partum individuals within 8 months of delivery ([Laws of Minnesota 2021, Reg. Sess. Chapter 17, Section 1](#)).

This Healthy Start conditional release (“Healthy Start”) may last for the duration of pregnancy and up to one year of the newborn child’s life.

These sentenced individuals are released to allow their baby to bond and are still required to engage in work, vocational training, substance abuse or mental health treatment, education, or parenting education, while completing their sentence in the community.

[Minn. Stat. § 244.065](#), subd. 2(d) requires the DOC to file a written report with the legislature each year, sharing data related to individuals released under this new authority from state correctional facilities.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections is required to report on the following for the prior calendar year:

1. The total number of individuals conditionally released from prison under this authority; and
2. The duration of the releases.

Healthy Start Policy and Process

The legislature required the Commissioner of Corrections to develop policy and criteria to implement this subdivision according to public safety and generally accepted correctional practice.¹ DOC Policy #205.123 Healthy Start Placement for Pregnant and Post-Partum Persons now governs the Healthy Start process, criteria for eligibility, and the standard for approval or denial.

Policy Criteria and Review Process

DOC Health Services identifies potentially Healthy Start eligible individuals at intake through testing and inquiring about pregnancy or post-partum status. Identified individuals are referred to the parenting coordinator for screening and a public safety review conducted by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals who make recommendations to the Commissioner of Corrections. If approved, the Healthy Start Release Team begins planning for placement on

¹ [Minn. Stat. § 244.065](#), subd. 2(c).

conditional release.

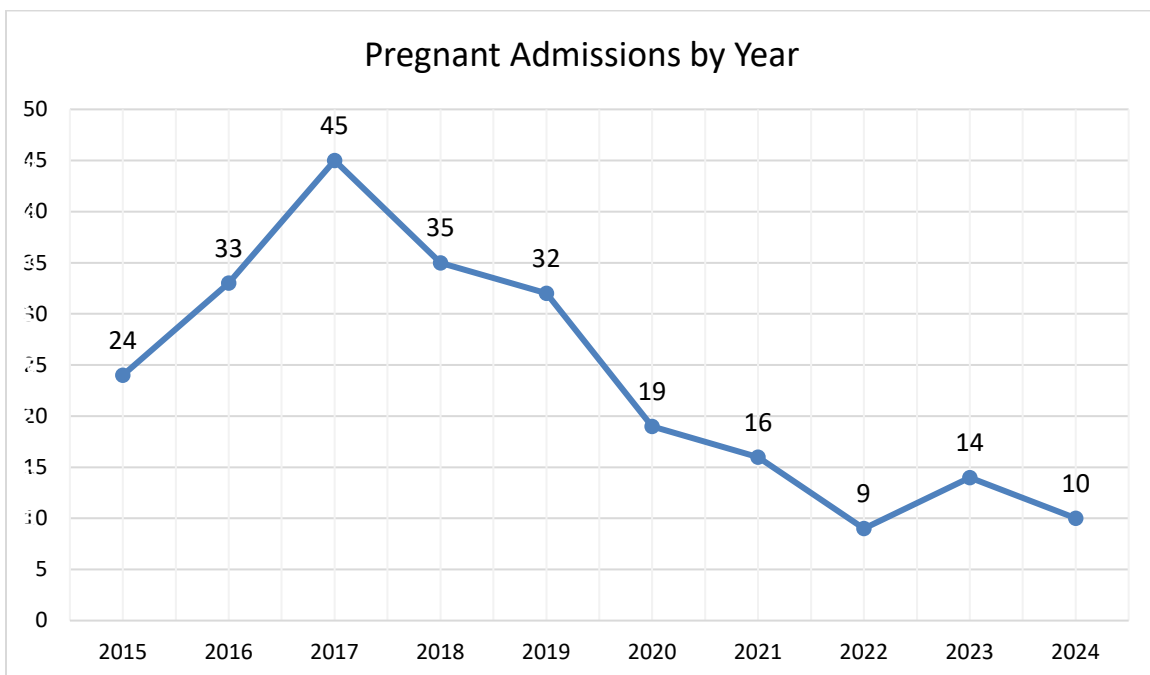
The DOC developed its eligibility criteria in alignment with recommendations from child development experts regarding the attachment needs of infants, specifically that infants have better outcomes when bonded with an ongoing primary caregiver.

Statute allows for Healthy Start release time to extend for up to one year post birth. If an individual would not normally be released during that year, they are not eligible, as the caregiver role must be uninterrupted by a return to prison. Those not legally permitted to parent their infant are also excluded from participating. Limited exceptions may be granted to the one-year time limited based on the health of the infant like, for example, a neonatal intensive care requirement.

Trends in Admissions to Prison While Pregnant

In establishing the need for Healthy Start legislation, the DOC and stakeholders examined and shared data between the years 2015- 2019. On average there were 25-30 pregnant persons admitted to prison per year, and 40 percent of those had less than one year to serve. Prior to 2021, the DOC did not have data on a person's post-partum status and only pregnancy information was available. Since the statute's inception, the number of pregnant individuals has declined (Figure 1). The overall population at Minnesota Correctional Facility (MCF)-Shakopee continues to increase but the numbers of individuals admitted who are pregnant remains lower than historical patterns.

Figure 1. Number of Pregnant Person Admissions (2015 – 2024)



Policy Review and Evaluation

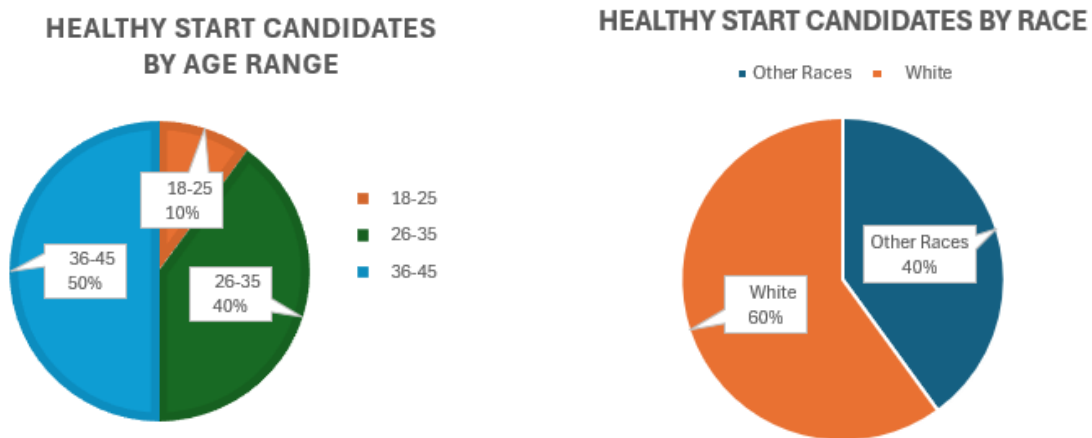
The DOC annually reviews this policy and continually seeks improvements as more is learned about impacted individuals and their babies. The DOC regularly consults with agency partners and community stakeholders, particularly members of the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet, to discuss Healthy Start and other policies that support or create barriers for incarcerated parents and their children.

The DOC also contracted with the University of Minnesota to develop an evaluation plan, including establishing data collection, developing evaluation criteria and metrics, and collecting feedback from program participants. In 2024, the university’s Dr. Rebecca Shlafer and Ingie Osman completed an evaluation of the implementation of the Healthy Start Act. The report is expected to be released in 2025. The DOC will review the recommendations in the report to look for policy and process improvements.

2024 Healthy Start Data

The DOC captures demographic data for people screened for Healthy Start and those granted the conditional release. Between January 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024, ten women were screened for Healthy Start. Sixty percent of the women screened were white² and half were over the age of 36 years old.

Figure 2. Pregnant or Post-Partum Persons Screened for Healthy Start by Age and Race

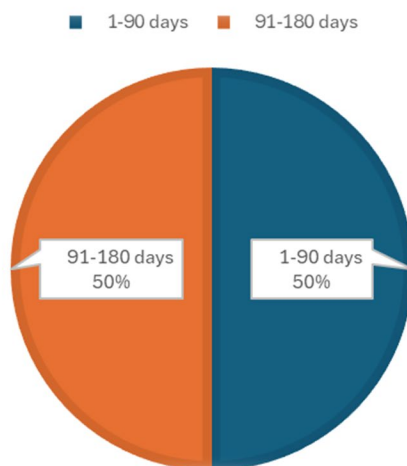


² In reporting the race of Healthy Start participants, racial groups comprising fewer than five people were grouped as “Other Races” to protect the identity of participants.

Individuals Granted Healthy Start Release

In 2024, four people were released on Healthy Start. The majority of those released were white and between the ages of 26-35. Half of the participants were conditionally released for three to six months before reaching their actual incarceration release date while half were conditionally released for less than three months (Figure 3). One participant who was released on Healthy Start was later returned to prison when she decided not to parent her child upon birth.

Figure 3. Numbers of Days on Conditional Release



Individuals Deemed Ineligible for Healthy Start Release

In 2024, the DOC determined that six people were ineligible for Healthy Start. In reviewing the demographics of those deemed ineligible for Healthy Start release, 50 percent were white and 50 percent were of other races. Four individuals (66 percent) were committed to the DOC from the seven-county metro area (Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, Washington) and two (33 percent) were from Greater MN counties. Like those who were released on Healthy Start, the majority of women who were ineligible for Healthy Start were in the 26-35-year-old range.

Of the six candidates found ineligible for Healthy Start, one had already lost parental rights to the infant, and another was denied due to public safety concerns—specifically, the individual posed risks to the infant if released without addressing underlying challenges. The remaining four candidates were screened out based on their length of time to serve. One had less than 30 days remaining at MCF-Shakopee, leaving insufficient time to plan for an earlier release. The other three had sentences exceeding the one-year release window allowed under Healthy Start, with time remaining ranging from 366 days to over three years. In these cases, the mothers would have had to return to prison after up to one year in the community, which the statute does not permit.

Figure 4. Number of Individuals Deemed Ineligible by Reason

