Nearly three years ago, the U.S. Department of Justice announced it was going to investigate the way Pennsylvania treated its prisoners with mental illness or intellectual disabilities.

Last week, in a letter to Governor Tom Wolf, the U.S. Department of Justice wrote that it was closing its investigation because the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections had already made so many significant changes and improvements.

“We are confident that, through the reforms Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has initiated and with its committed pursuit of reforms going forward, thousands of prisoners with serious mental illness and/or intellectual disabilities throughout the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections’ system will experience improvements in their treatment and care,’’ the letter read.

“Our department took these suggestions to heart from the beginning,’’ Pennsylvania Secretary of Corrections John E. Wetzel said. “One-fourth of our prison population suffers from some sort of mental illness, and the treatment of these individuals was a significant concern.’’

“We are committed to doing the right thing and this was an important change that needed to be addressed,’’ Wetzel added. “As we always do, our staff immediately embraced the opportunity to make our system better, to protect the safety of all who work and live in our institutions, and improve the outcomes of those in our care.’’

The U.S. Department of Justice, thanking Wetzel and his staff, cited several positive changes and reforms, including:

* Solitary Confinement and Discipline. The Pennsylvania DOC created specialized treatment units for offenders with serious mental illness and intellectual disabilities. Problems are resolved informally or with mental health staff and discipline is no longer permitted for self-injurious behavior.
* Out-of-Cell Options. Inmates with mental illness or intellectual disabilities are offered at least 20 hours per week out-of-cell time for activities and treatment. Treatment units are less stark, featuring colorful murals and recovery-based messages, resulting in greater participation and fewer incidents of harm.
* Mental Health Diagnosis and Classification. The classification process has been expanded to include all prisoners with a current or past diagnosis, protecting them from restrictive housing.
* Mental Health Care Delivery. By designating certain facilities to specialize in the treatment for prisoners with mentally illness or intellectual disabilities, offenders can benefit from expanded treatment services and mental health personnel.
* Training. The PaDOC has trained hundreds of corrections officers and more than 500 peer specialists (inmates) to reinforce the efforts of mental health staff and to support prisoners in need of treatment and suicide prevention.

The Justice department recommended that Pennsylvania’s DOC continue and expand its efforts to improve treatment of offenders with mental health issues to ensure they are receiving appropriate care.

Governor Wolf has supported the work of Pennsylvania DOC in finding the most effective ways to help offenders with mental illness and learning disabilities, including support of diversionary courts.

But these changes do not come without cost, Wetzel said, and we hope all government officials will continue to support our commitment toward greater success in the future.

 “We have devoted time and resources to training staff and developing best practices,’’ Wetzel said. “Pennsylvania is proud to be a national leader in these and many other initiatives to make our facilities better and safer.’’