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**July 2021 Prison  
Communications  
Briefing**



# A Snapshot of Communications from Prison

A brief summary of concerns, questions, and perspectives provided by incarcerated people and their loved ones to JHA in July 2021

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# Introduction

In July 2021 JHA staff fielded more than 165 communications – including more than one hundred letters from people who are incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) – and over 60 contacts (letters, emails, calls) from people with concerns about people within IDOC. Thank you to everyone who has called, emailed, and written to JHA with information, questions, and updates.

Since JHA's last [Communications Bulletin](#) summarizing communications received in early 2021, we have resumed in-person prison monitoring and have visited 10 IDOC prisons, publishing facility reports on [Lincoln](#) and [Graham Correctional Centers](#) and [Stateville and the Northern Reception & Classification Center](#). Additionally, JHA included questions about access to information inside IDOC in our response letters to the incarcerated people who wrote to us from mid-March through mid-June. [Read our report here](#) to find out what people inside Illinois prisons shared with us about information access, content, reliability, timeliness, and suggestions for system-wide improvements.

JHA first issued [Communication Bulletins](#) at the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight thematic issues being reported and responses from IDOC. JHA uses the information shared to follow up with administrators as well as to advocate for and advance improvements. JHA continues to receive COVID-specific reports, particularly following surges in positive cases and new lockdowns. However, this summary demonstrates a broader range of concerns that JHA has increasingly been hearing.

Please note that JHA is not able to substantiate much of the information shared. We have consolidated information received and share it as an anecdotal resource. JHA also acknowledges that there will be wide variation in issues and practices over time and across the state. We are sharing the information we received to promote system and organizational transparency, and to increase public awareness of the issues impacting people who live and work in Illinois' prisons.

In providing an anonymous summary of these reports, JHA staff have worked to limit identifying information as much as possible while still providing a substantive explanation of the concern in order to share as much as possible while protecting confidentiality.

# Communications Summary: Trends by the Numbers

Issues Communicated to JHA in July*	
<u>Issue Category</u>	<u>Percent by Issue</u>
Staff Conduct & IDOC Practices	25%
Explanation & Application of Recent Legislation	20%
Sentencing Credits & Early Release	15%
Facility Conditions	10%
Request for Legal Representation or Referral	10%
Untreated Medical Concerns	10%
Dietary	5%
Access to Library	5%

*\* Percentages calculated out of a total of 102 letters from people incarcerated in Illinois prisons, and do not include letters received from or about out-of-state, Illinois county and federal, or unidentified facilities.*

JHA received letters from 23 IDOC prisons in July 2021: Big Muddy, Centralia, Decatur, Dixon, Graham, Hill, Illinois River, Jacksonville, Lawrence, Lincoln, Logan, Menard, Pinckneyville, Pontiac, Robinson, Shawnee, Sheridan, Southwestern, Stateville, Taylorville, Vandalia, Vienna, and Western.

# Issues Reported

## Staff Conduct

- Concern about staff conduct is one of the most common reasons people contact JHA. As an organization, we attempt to separate out reports related to the actions and behavior of staff that fall outside of IDOC protocol with those that are a critique of IDOC policy and practices. This distinction can be difficult without information and updates about the rules, regulations, and expectations of IDOC, and when policies are rapidly changing in response to new laws, environmental factors (such as the pandemic) and evolving practices; this is just one reason JHA pushes for increased transparency. For example, in July, JHA heard that people incarcerated at Lawrence were forced to throw out belongings as they were being transferred as part of the IDOC reclassification process. JHA reached out to IDOC administrators to clarify the policy related to personal property and to learn what information had been shared with staff and people being transferred so that we had a better idea of whether or not staff were acting in accordance with policy. IDOC stated the expectations were that large electronics would be shipped separately, and that excess consumables that did not fit in property boxes should be either used or sent home (if possible) prior to transfer. This information allowed JHA to distinguish between two different issues: the first being a complaint about an IDOC policy, and the second being staff conduct related to not following the policy.
- In July, several reports related to staff conduct were specific to lack of compliance with COVID-related protocols with regards to proper use of PPE and concerns about staff not getting vaccinated. Despite it being IDOC policy that staff wear masks, people continue to report to JHA that staff are not wearing masks. For example, the mother of someone incarcerated at Big Muddy wrote JHA that many of the employees are not wearing a mask, and said *“I’ve been to visit my son, he’s been vaccinated and I’ve been vaccinated. So, if we have to wear them they should have to wear them also.”* In a letter to JHA, a person incarcerated at Menard wrote concerned about accountability for staff not wearing PPE and not getting vaccinated, saying, *“I’m around the same people everyday but the officers are subject to change everyday and then come to work not wearing gloves or made to wear masks, or forced to take the shot to keep us safe from them. No one punishes them for not following this rule, but if I don’t wear a mask I can get put in seg or wrote up. If I refuse to get tested when they do it every Wednesday and Saturday morning I could get put in seg or*

*moved to the quarantine wing where everyone there has COVID.*” Since JHA received these July communications, Governor Pritzker **announced** on August 4, 2021 that all state employees working in congregate facilities are required to receive the COVID-19 vaccine by October 4, 2021.

- Reports of staff retaliation for an incarcerated person expressing concerns are frequently shared with JHA as well. Someone at Hill wrote that staff are retaliating against him for writing grievances and filing litigation by taking his legal materials and opening his privileged legal mail outside of his presence. A man at Menard reported, *“Men in the condemned building aren’t getting yard or gym and are written up when they complain or sent to seg and personal belongings go missing when sent to seg.”*
- An individual incarcerated in Lawrence wrote to JHA expressing concerns about staff exhibiting racist behavior, noting that white staff treat Black and Latino people who are incarcerated differently than white incarcerated people, and recommended that IDOC hire more diverse staff.

*“We’ve got to start making the staff more diverse because most of the officers here are white, have never been around black people before now, never had to interact with black people before now, be around their body language they use so there is a lot lost in translation with each other. A lot of those officers come from small towns they all know each other or are family in some kind of way. They believe every bad thing they’ve heard about black people so we see racism more all the time. Black and white inmates are treated different.”*

– Someone incarcerated at Lawrence CC

- JHA also received reports from people who are concerned about staff using inappropriate language, obscenities, and threats. For example, in July, someone at Pontiac stated that security staff harrass men there, treat them *“any way they want,”* and tell them that staff can get away with this because of the absence of cameras. Someone at Robinson wrote, *“Many of us who speak out of concerns about COVID are being threatened by staff that our jobs/schooling will be taken, or we will be transferred to higher security prisons as a way of punishing us.”*

We encourage people to document and grieve these issues so they can be recorded and investigated. This is an area where increased data collection, independent oversight, and an improved grievance system are required. In May, IDOC hired Chief Inspection Officer Latoya Hughes, who is tasked with improving the grievance process and providing oversight of the statewide grievance system. Chief Inspector Hughes has reportedly visited each facility to get a better understanding of the current grievance system and the myriad issues and concerns regarding it that people in Illinois prisons have. JHA looks forward to the implementation of a more fair and effective process as well as data collection and reporting on the issues being grieved.

Effective August 1, 2019, [Administrative Directive \(AD\) 01.02.350: Addressing and Reducing Disparate Treatment and Impact](#), established that IDOC would continually track, review and address issues where disparate treatment and impact may occur within IDOC, including within the following processes: classification, housing assignments, job and correction industries assignments, program assignments, discipline, grievances, and staff training. The AD defines “disparate treatment” as “treatment of a person or group that is influenced by stereotypes or bias, whether explicit or implicit, based on race, color, or ethnicity.” We have been informed that at least some of the intended work and reporting established in the AD has been delayed by COVID-19. However, IDOC did introduce a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan in March that included a [memo issued June 22, 2021](#) stating IDOC will “no longer use the term ‘offender’ to refer to the individuals in our custody. Instead, staff are now required to refer to members of the incarcerated population as ‘individuals in custody.’”

## Explanation & Application of Recent Legislation

- Many of the calls, emails, and letters JHA received in July requested information related to [House Bill \(HB\) 3653](#), the omnibus criminal justice reform legislation known as the SAFE-T Act (Safety Accountability Fairness Equity Today) which became effective on July 1, 2021. In particular, people who are incarcerated and their families requested an explanation of how to apply provisions of the legislation impacting length of stay in prison to their particular

case, specifically seeking information and reporting concerns about the calculation of sentencing credits.

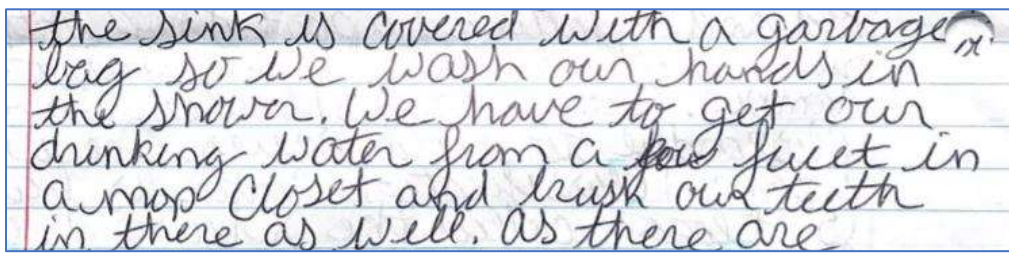
- Other people contacted JHA asking for details and an explanation of [Senate Bill \(SB\) 2129](#) which was signed by Governor Pritzker on July 15, 2021 and will go into effect on January 1, 2022. This legislation allows the State's Attorneys' Office of the county where a defendant was sentenced to petition the sentencing court for resentencing if it finds that the "original sentence no longer advances the interests of justice." The people contacting JHA want to know the specific procedure to get a motion for resentencing entered.

July communications with JHA demonstrate there is a serious interest in learning about recent legislation in more detail, in having access to the text of the laws or bills, and in receiving a plain language interpretation.

## **Access to IDOC Rules & COVID Protocols**

- Five people from four different prisons wrote JHA specifically requesting a copy of IDOC's [Department Rule 504: Discipline and Grievances](#). Updates relating to IDOC's [use of restrictive housing](#) have been made in the past year, but these are not yet reflected in the relevant Administrative Code section relating to use of discipline and segregation. It remains critical that people who are incarcerated have access to IDOC policies in order to know the standards for discipline that people who are incarcerated are being held to and to adequately grieve a concern.
- People continued to request information about expectations for COVID-19. For example, someone at Robinson wrote *"The administration is refusing to inform us about the exact protocols/regulations for COVID and there is a feeling of pending doom/gloom that is so thick you could cut it with a knife."*

## Housing & Cleanliness



The sink is covered with a garbage bag so we wash our hands in the shower. We have to get our drinking water from a ~~low~~ faucet in a mop closet and brush our teeth in there as well. As there are

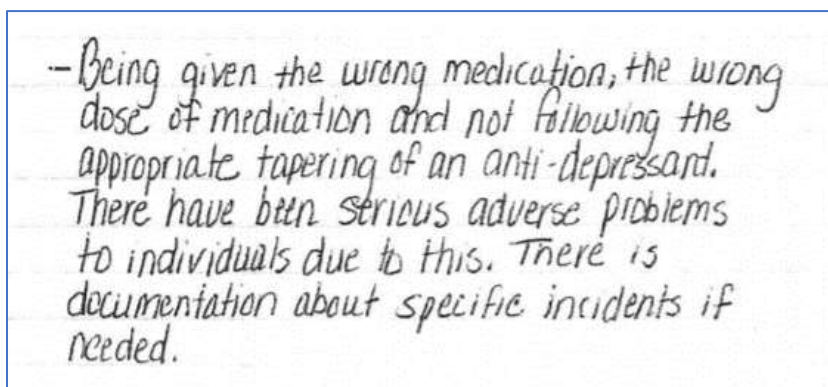
- Logan

- As is common, JHA received several letters reporting various facility condition related concerns from people at different prisons across the state including Illinois River, Lawrence, Logan, Pontiac, and Western. These reports include descriptions of the experience of being housed in old and decaying buildings where mold, ventilation, bug infestations, brown water, overflowing sewage, and extreme temperatures are regularly reported. At Illinois River, a person described brown water coming out of the sinks, vents that haven't been cleaned in 30 years, and ants and spiders in cells. It was also reported at Illinois River that soap and bleach to clean cells is not distributed and there is no use of laundry soap in the washing machines.
- Plumbing issues were reported at a few facilities. At Pontiac, someone described having to step in sewage-filled showers. At Western another man wrote, *"all the toilets are now shooting urine and fecal matter like geysers adding 1-2 inches of matter to our cell floors."* In that case, the person writing JHA shared that staff reportedly responded by saying no one knew how to turn off the toilets and *"they'd need to deal with it until the plumber came."* At Logan, a woman wrote JHA describing serious mold and plumbing issues, requesting that all the women housed there be moved to a new location, and reporting that the correctional officers tell them the prison should not be open. JHA also received a report from Robinson about poor ventilation in the dorms that results in *"toilet smells"* spreading over the dayroom, halls, and dorms, as well as noting personal fans were not helping with extreme temperatures.
- Most people reporting facility condition concerns also requested greater access to hygiene supplies, increased access to laundry as well as laundry soap for clothing, and better cleaning of their housing areas, particularly in light of surging COVID numbers and renewed COVID-related concerns.



- Also, in regard to housing conditions and COVID, JHA received several calls, emails, and letters relating to Robinson reporting overcrowding in dorms as well as continued acceptance of new people into housing areas and transfers resulting in inadequate social distancing and fear of exposure. One person at Robinson wrote this about his wing: *"It is my understanding that this facility is not to exceed 600 prisoners total, 10 men per room, and no more than 50 men per wing. However, we are being packed full with 18 men in in my room alone! My wing has about 80 men fighting to keep conditions clean and socially distanced as best we can."*

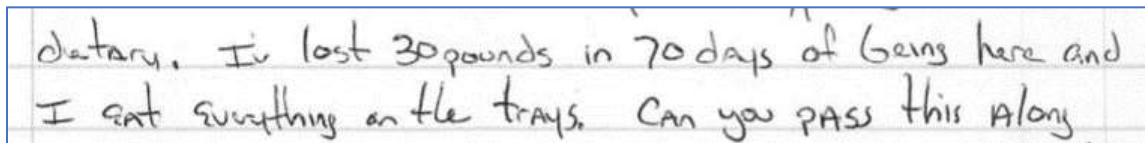
## Medical

A handwritten note on lined paper, enclosed in a blue rectangular border. The text is written in cursive and reads: "- Being given the wrong medication, the wrong dose of medication and not following the appropriate tapering of an anti-depressant. There have been serious adverse problems to individuals due to this. There is documentation about specific incidents if needed."

- Logan

- A few people wrote JHA reporting concerns about distribution of medication, including being denied medication previously prescribed by a doctor outside the facility or at another facility, or only receiving over-the-counter pain medication for documented chronic medical issues. The sister of a person with disabilities at Illinois River reported that the medical staff took him off all his prescribed medication, including medication for high blood pressure, replacing it with ibuprofen. A person at Menard said he has mental health issues but that he had not yet been seen or talked to by anyone about his mental health in the two months since his arrival at the prison, reporting that in July when he'd requested the crisis team, he was told *"that the crisis team had left for the day, at 2:36pm on a Tuesday."*

## Food



Detary. I'v lost 30 pounds in 70 days of being here and I eat everything on the trays. Can you pass this along.

- Hill

- JHA received reports from several different facilities including Graham, Hill, Lawrence, and Menard regarding small food portions, repeated menu items, undercooked meals, and missing categories of food such as bread, dairy, and “fats.” One person suggested that Hill is not following IDOC’s five-week master menu and requested a surprise inspection of the facility to observe the food being served. A few other people wrote with concerns related to the sanitation of the kitchen and food handling, along with a report of broken kitchen equipment at Lawrence. JHA has long advocated for the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and local health departments to inspect and report on compliance with health and safety regulations in prisons in the same way that hospitals, restaurants, and other public and private places are routinely monitored for compliance or violation of health and safety guidelines. A family member of someone incarcerated at Graham reported people only get three to five minutes to eat now that they were able to go to the chow hall for meals, sharing the incarcerated individual’s comment that “*some inmates are trying to put as much as they can in their mouths while returning trays and some have choked.*” A woman writing from Logan shared that because the food is not perceived as edible, more food is being thrown away than is being eaten.

## Law Library

- Several people at different facilities reported concerns about law library access. One person writing from Menard reported the materials in the satellite law library are outdated and that it had been over a year since he had access to the full law library. He sent a grievance where he stated the law library has prevented him from working on his post-conviction petition and in IDOC’s response on the form, staff stated “*In accordance to library policies, you must have a pending due date of something in the case; either by statute requirement or court order. If there is something due, it is your responsibility to provide the proof of such deadline. Per [your] post-conviction case the court’s docket shows that you have a public*

*defender. Again, per library policies only pro-se parties are given deadline status for the law library.”* Another person shared a grievance written in July from Menard’s Medium Security Unit (MSU) reporting that he was denied access to the courts because the library kiosk is not working. IDOC’s response acknowledged the broken equipment stating, *“The MSU Kiosk has not been working and GTL continues to work on the problem since January 2021,”* and that all research materials for requests with court deadlines have been provided via state loan processing.



JHA encourages you to continue to share your experiences and the information you are hearing from people who are incarcerated by leaving JHA a detailed voicemail message at (312) 291-9183 ext. 208 or completing our online form [here](#). JHA will continue to publicly share the information we receive.

The letters, phone calls, and emails we receive inform our work and drive our advocacy efforts. For those who contact JHA seeking individual recourse or representation, we appreciate your understanding that JHA does not have the ability or capacity to provide either, but the information shared with us sheds light on what is happening inside Illinois prisons, informs the public and stakeholders of these realities, and fuels our reform efforts.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9555 x205 or [jvollen@thejha.org](mailto:jvollen@thejha.org)

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report concerns and issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff are reading every letter and tracking this information to monitor what is occurring behind prison walls and to advocate for humane policies and practices. Family and friends can contact JHA via our website [www.thejha.org](http://www.thejha.org) or by leaving a message at 312.291.9183 x208.

Since 1901, JHA has provided public oversight of Illinois' juvenile and adult correctional facilities. Every year, JHA staff and trained volunteers inspect prisons, jails, and detention centers throughout the state. Based on these inspections, JHA regularly issues reports that are instrumental in improving prison conditions. JHA humbly thanks all the persons who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.



The John Howard Association was the proud recipient of the 2015 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions