
**Prison
Communications**



JHA Communication Response Summary

Spring 2021

Introduction

As a way to gather more direct information about specific issues, conditions, and practices which people inside Illinois prisons experience, JHA has started responding to those who have written to us by asking specific questions. In March 2021, JHA asked incarcerated people who had written to us the month prior to respond to questions on how they access information – both about COVID-19 and in general – and the extent to which they are able to do so. Those questions were:

1. How much information do you get from the internal TV channel? How much from a tablet?
2. Do you find this information reliable?
3. If you do, what additional or other information would you want to get on the internal TV channel if you could?
4. Do you have a tablet and if so what other additional or other information would you want to get on your tablet?

These same questions were sent again in April 2021. JHA received a total of twenty-seven responses from people incarcerated in fifteen facilities between mid-March and mid-June 2021. The responses came overwhelmingly but not exclusively from people incarcerated in medium security facilities, and were relatively evenly distributed between the northern, central, and southern regions of the state.

Where did our responses come from?

Security level	Prisons	Quantity
Maximum	Menard, Pontiac	2
Medium	Big Muddy, Dixon, Graham, Hill, Illinois River, Lawrence, Pinckneyville, Shawnee, Sheridan, Western	20
Minimum	East Moline, Vienna	3
Multi-level	Logan	2

What did JHA hear?

Question One: How much information do you get from the internal TV channel? How much from a tablet?

“Information on the internal TV channel is usually outdated and minor compared to the information inmates really need (law change, educational classes being offered in facility and other facilities, and listings of what staff members to contact for different issues). The information is also unreadable. The tablets are more helpful and much easier to access.” – Hill

“At Pontiac Corr. Center, they do not post all the up to date changes on the institutional channel. We have some postings from February 2020 that remain on the channel. They have to put a weekly date to make new postings and updates to inform inmates of the most recent changes.” – Pontiac

“There was a televised posting of reasons (i.e. compelling) by IDOC officials and inmates on the so-called institutional TV station as to why one should take the COVID vaccination, but no numbers positive or negative of how many inmates were infected, and/or who died from the COVID virus. Those of us who have the 800 model of the tablet cannot get a wifi connection in certain cells, whereby, we cannot keep up with the latest COVID information.” – Big Muddy

“[A]t this time we get minimum information on our TV provided by the institution regarding anything other than security and we receive very little on our tablet.” – Illinois River

“The internal TV channel is rarely updated. Most of the time it plays old news. Some of its programming from 2017.” – Menard

“Most of the information on the TV channel is old and needs updated weekly or monthly.”
– East Moline

- JHA heard a wide variety of responses about the content of the information provided on internal TV channels. People from several facilities reported that they received information about the COVID-19 vaccine from their internal TV channels. However, one person incarcerated at Illinois River stated that they received almost no information about anything other than security procedures, and another individual incarcerated at Western stated that most of the information they received pertains to post-release and is of limited use to those who are not close to their release dates.
- People across facilities reported that the information provided via the internal TV channel is out of date; a third of the responses received by JHA contained this complaint. One individual writing from Shawnee indicated that they often learn things about the facility through word of mouth before it makes it to the internal TV channel. Individuals at multiple prisons stated that some of the information provided by their facility’s internal channel has not been updated since before the pandemic began. *IDOC noted in a response to a draft of this report that information is intentionally left up on the institutional channel for long periods of time to keep it accessible to those newly entering a prison and to reinforce facility procedures for those already there.*
- JHA also received complaints from people at multiple prisons that the text relaying information over the internal TV channel is printed too small and/or disappears from the screen too quickly to be read in full. One person recalled only having time to read half of a “slide” and then having to wait forty minutes for it to come around again to finish reading it.
- About half of the respondents indicated that they had a tablet. Incarcerated people largely agreed that the tablets provide better information, but most still found the amount of information available to them to be unsatisfactory. Additionally, people from multiple prisons reported issues with tablets not working in cells or, in one case, not working at all. Considering the amount of time people inside many facilities have spent on lockdown since

March 2020, the lack of access to tablet connectivity in cells poses a significant impediment to communication and information receipt.

- JHA heard from multiple people who still use MP3 players and expressed frustration that they would have to purchase a tablet to access information. They wondered why there were not equivalent communications available via their MP3 players.

Do you have a tablet?		
	Quantity	Percentage
Yes	13	48%
No	5	19%
No response	9	33%

Question Two: Do you find this information reliable?

“NO I DO NOT. I mean the tablet stuff about vaccines and stuff, sure... but [the institutional TV channel]? Oh no... not at all.” – Western

“Most if any info is not reliable because of the simple fact that they say one thing and do another.” – Graham

“The info on the tablet is helpful. But often it is super late. And again all detain[ees] don’t own a tablet. And often the tablet kiosk in the dayroom be broke or on pause and when it does work you only have 20 minutes to utilize it.” – Logan

“Only the information on the tablet is reliable.” – Hill

“For the most part, the information is reliable if you can read it. The writing is really small.” – Pinckneyville

Do you believe the information you receive is reliable?		
Response	Quantity	Percentage
Yes, I find the information I receive to be reliable.	7	26%
No, I do not find the information I receive to be reliable (includes “the information I receive is too outdated/vague to be reliable”).	7	26%
I find the information I receive to be somewhat reliable.	3	11%
The information I receive from the internal TV channel is not reliable. The information I receive from my tablet is reliable.	2	7%
I do not know whether the information I receive is reliable.	1	4%
No response	7	26%

- Nearly a third of people who answered this question consider the information they received to be reliable, without qualification.
- The same proportion of respondents answered that they consider the information they receive to be unreliable, without qualification. Multiple people indicated that the information they receive from IDOC is either too outdated or too vague to be helpful.
- Two respondents from different facilities reiterated the concern that having a tablet was the only way to access reliable information. A third person expressed that he felt paying a monthly subscription fee for the news app was the only way to receive good information.

JHA notes in these responses the apparently widespread perception that use of a tablet provides access to better, more reliable information. As tablets are not provided free of charge but instead must be purchased, this may cause disparities between the quality of information accessible to those who have and those who do not have the financial resources to purchase a tablet. JHA understands that IDOC has procured a vendor contract that will provide tablets for all people who are incarcerated in state prisons and is hopeful that this will increase the availability of information that incarcerated people feel they can rely on.

Questions Three and Four: What additional or other information would you want to get on the internal TV channel if you could? and What additional or other information would you want to get on your tablet?

“I would like to actually have a dedicated 24 hour channel for the institutional information that we all need. The movies could be played on a secondary channel like a lot of other facilities do. I would like to see relevant, up to date information that you CAN READ on the institutional channel.” – Western

*“I would like to get, if possible, updates on bills, what’s being proposed, what’s happening throughout IDOC, etc... plus additional apps like looking up legal cases, educational, like doing college courses, things that are positive to help one rehabilitate themselves, etc.”
– Graham*

“It would be nice to have access to law library app on tablet. Certain county jails have law library app on tablet. Also; county jail tablets have: phone, commissary, school, calculator, music, etc. text app.” – Sheridan

“Grievances. I want to be able to file my grievances electronically. I want to also be able to call family and friends. Put the phone app on the tablet. And music videos.” – Big Muddy

What additional information would you like to receive via the institutional TV channel or tablets?		
Suggestion	Quantity	Percentage
Information on new, pending, and proposed legislation related to correctional or sentencing reform.	10	37%
Access to a legal database on tablets	8	30%
A phone app on tablets	7	26%
Up-to-date information on the facility (i.e., rule changes, reopening plans, etc.)	7	26%
Educational resources	6	22%
Reentry information and resources	6	22%
Tablet compatibility with day-to-day facility procedures	5	19%
Ability to receive to store photos on tablets	4	15%
Information on IDOC policies including IDOC's Inmate Handbook	3	11%
Email and/or texting capabilities on tablet	3	11%
Entertainment media	3	11%
Statistical information on positive COVID tests and deaths within IDOC	3	11%

Note: Because respondents were able to make more than one suggestion, these percentages do not add up to 100%.

- In terms of information related to COVID-19, multiple people stated that they wanted access to information about the number of people at their prison who had tested positive for or died of COVID-19. One person recalled that he had been able to track the spread of COVID-19 within IDOC thanks to information sent to him by his family but believed that the information should have been provided to all incarcerated people by IDOC.
- The most common request was access to information regarding upcoming bills and new laws relating to correctional reform, sentencing, and conditions inside Illinois correctional facilities. More than a third of people mentioned wanting IDOC to provide them with information about new and pending legislation that would affect their day-to-day lives or the length of their sentence.

- Nearly as many people requested access to a legal database or law e-library on their tablets. For example, one individual incarcerated at Sheridan expressed his confusion about why IDOC could not provide residents with access to an online law library through tablet when, in his experience, some county jails have this functionality.
- More than a quarter of respondents commented that they want to be able to make phone calls from their tablets. One individual incarcerated at Pinckneyville reported that most fights he sees are over the phones and suggested that adding a phone app to the tablets would cut down on fighting significantly.
- Another common request was for information on obtaining a job and applying for financial assistance post-release to be broadcasted on the institutional TV channel. One respondent incarcerated at Big Muddy reported that all of the information on post-release programs broadcasted over the institutional channel pertains to people who will be returning to the Chicago area, with little if any information available for those who are returning to downstate communities. He also reported that there was no information provided about services and programs that are not Christian based.
- People wanted vocational educational information to be made available. An individual incarcerated at Western suggested that the internal TV channel broadcast programs meant to educate people about career options within the trades: *“For a person that may not have an idea as to what they would like to do, these type of videos might spark the flame inside them/us.”*
- Many respondents reported that they would like to be able to access general educational programming through their tablets. Suggestions on topics included programs geared toward improving literacy, computer literacy, and math skills; an online GED program; and online college courses.
- Another common request was for tablets to be more helpful for day-to-day practical needs within the prisons. Respondents wanted to be able to view commissary prices and menus, request sick call or religious contact, and file grievances via their tablets. This is information people in prison seek and use frequently; making it more readily accessible would decrease the frustration people in prison experience trying to get ahold of it and hopefully improve feelings of being heard and having needs met.
- Some respondents expressed a desire for more entertainment-based programming. One individual incarcerated at Logan requested a dedicated movie channel, a respondent at Lawrence requested access to e-books, and another individual writing from Big Muddy wanted to be able to view music videos.

- Three individuals stated that they wanted access to email or texting capabilities. JHA's understanding is that the tablets do have messaging capabilities. JHA is unclear whether these respondents are dissatisfied with the messaging app that is currently provided or whether they are experiencing connectivity issues that make sending and receiving messages difficult.

Based upon the responses we received to our questions as well as information shared by incarcerated people with JHA through survey responses, letters and in conversations during our prison visits, it is clear that there are benefits of future communications contracts including provision of tablets for all of the men and women in IDOC custody, JHA has asserted this prior to this report and is pleased to learn that IDOC is taking steps to make this a reality. Improvement of Wi-Fi connectivity and functionality inside the facilities is also needed to increase the useability and benefits the tablets can have, including the ability to expand information sharing. We appreciate the insights and constructive suggestions provided by those who shared their thoughts and experiences with us.



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

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 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