

---

**Facility Report**



# **Monitoring Visit to Decatur Correctional Center 2022**

---

# Table of Contents

<b>Key Observations .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Population and Demographics .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Outside Communication &amp; Visitation .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Mail .....	13
Phones .....	14
Visitation .....	16
<b>Discipline .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Issues Related to Staff .....</b>	<b>19</b>
Lack of Professionalism.....	19
Non-responsiveness.....	21
Discrimination & Favoritism .....	26
<b>Healthcare.....</b>	<b>29</b>
General Healthcare .....	29
Eyecare and Dental .....	32
Mental Health .....	33
Substance Use Disorder Treatment .....	34
<b>COVID-19 Impact and Response.....</b>	<b>36</b>
Vaccinations and Masking.....	37
Facility Quarantine Procedures .....	38
<b>Pregnancy &amp; The Moms &amp; Babies Program .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Productive Activity .....</b>	<b>43</b>
General Comments .....	43
Work Assignments.....	45

Outdoor Time & Recreation.....	47
Education.....	47
Vocational Programs .....	49
Religious Services .....	51
Reentry Preparation .....	51
Library.....	53
Other Programs and Services .....	53
<b>Physical Plant Conditions.....</b>	<b>54</b>
In General.....	54
Water Quality.....	54
Temperature and Ventilation .....	56
Mold and Pests.....	57
<b>Commissary .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Dietary .....</b>	<b>61</b>

## Key Observations

1. Staffing shortages of more than 20% had reportedly impacted many activities and services at Decatur, as at other Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) prisons. In particular, women at Decatur were affected by significantly reduced yard and gym time and infrequent mail services.
2. Facility quarantine procedures for COVID were inconsistent and unduly restrictive. The lack of contact with loved ones during quarantines caused significant distress.
3. Many women felt that some staff behaved unprofessionally and enforced rules inconsistently, potentially due to favoritism.
4. The inability to receive information about important matters, e.g., early release opportunities, was a common source of stress. Staff members were reportedly often unable or unwilling to provide information or clarity.
5. Living conditions at Decatur needed improvement. Of great concern was the water supply; Legionella bacteria was detected in the prison's water multiple times in 2022.
6. Women reported that medical concerns were dismissed or inadequately addressed, with some resulting in a severe medical issue that could have been prevented with earlier treatment.
7. Programming opportunities were scarce, especially for women with longer time left to serve. Some newer programs, such as the WestCare substance use disorder treatment program, received positive feedback. However, these programs have low enrollment capacity.
8. As with all IDOC facilities, Decatur has had issues procuring items for commissary. People in custody have had difficulty obtaining essential items and had noticed a decline in item quality.

# Recommendations

1. Prioritize mailroom staffing to ensure that women receive mail regularly. JHA advised that if a permanent mailroom officer could not be hired, Decatur must implement other methods in the interim to improve the frequency of mail services, such as training more staff to temporarily assist with mail. JHA was pleased to hear during draft review for this report in March 2023 that a mailroom officer had been hired since our visit.
2. IDOC must modify quarantine procedures to reduce restrictions on movement and outside communication, when feasible and safe. Decatur should keep women informed of the procedures for facility quarantines.
3. Address the behavior of staff members who do not treat people in custody with respect, and recognize the staff members who do. Monitor disciplinary sanctions of people in custody to ensure that they are administered fairly and only when necessary.
4. Continually educate counselors about IDOC policies and procedures so that they can better answer the questions of people in custody. Ensure that grievances are responded to promptly and meaningfully.
5. Inform individuals in custody about facility inspections and safety, including water test results and any potentially dangerous conditions, such as legionella bacteria in the water supply. Prioritize reducing instances of mold, pests, and poor ventilation.
6. Monitor healthcare services to ensure that medical concerns are not being summarily dismissed. Expedite healthcare staff recruitment to reduce wait times.
7. Ensure that all individuals in custody can engage in productive activity. Individuals with longer times until release are in particular need of more programming opportunities. The capacity for substance use disorder treatment should be increased.
8. Improve access to clothing and personal care products for state-issued items and items on commissary. Ensure the availability of products that are intended for women and that are of higher quality.

# Executive Summary

JHA conducted a monitoring visit of Decatur Correctional Center on October 4, 2022. Decatur is a minimum-security prison, and one of the two IDOC women's prisons. Our last visit to Decatur was in [June 2021](#).



—Satellite image of Decatur

In August 2022, JHA conducted an adapted [“Measuring the Quality of Prison Life” \(MQPL\) survey](#) at Decatur via mail. This survey was created by the Prison Research Centre at the University of Cambridge (PRC) in order to evaluate the culture inside prisons, and it was adapted for use in Illinois in collaboration with the PRC. It is an evidence-based instrument designed to collect and assess the perceptions and experiences shared by people who are incarcerated. JHA is piloting this survey in the United States along with our partners in [New York](#) and [Pennsylvania](#) in order to better identify, understand, and address issues inside prisons.

As of the end of 2022, JHA had received responses from 204 people at Decatur who had participated in our survey. JHA sent more than enough surveys for all of the 411 people reportedly incarcerated at Decatur at the time of the survey distribution to participate. Therefore, the survey response rate represents approximately half of the static population. Some [responses from the survey](#) are incorporated herein. Additionally, this report includes information from letters that JHA received from Decatur in 2022. The impressions and voices of people

directly impacted by incarceration are critical in advancing more humane prison conditions. JHA's work reflects the information shared with us by those who write to us, submit survey responses, and speak with us when we are inside prisons.

In addition to sharing input from JHA's visits, communications, and surveys with IDOC officials on an ongoing basis, JHA shared a draft of this report with IDOC administrators on January 30, 2023. We conducted draft review of this report with IDOC on March 2, and received additional written comments from IDOC March 29, which are incorporated.

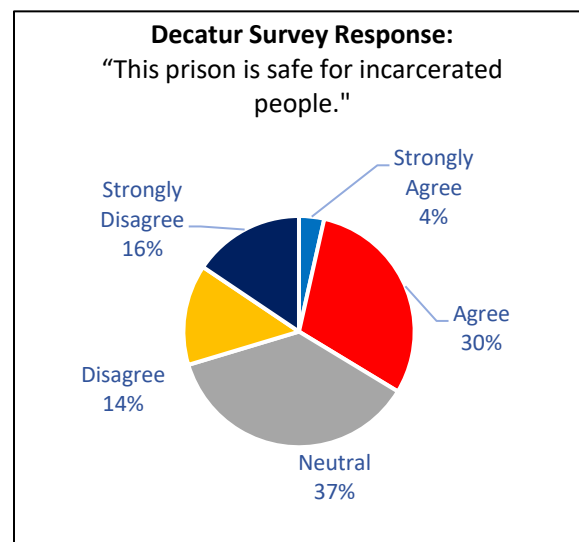
The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact daily life and activities at Decatur. We visited the prison shortly after a facility-wide quarantine that had lasted approximately two weeks. During the visit, people recalled that the prison also had a quarantine in January 2022 that lasted closer to two months, and periodic quarantines continued to occur into 2023. Many of the women answered JHA's survey during an August 2022 quarantine, and we therefore received significant input on Decatur's facility quarantine procedures. Women reported being given as little as 20 minutes to shower and use the phone each day, no yard or gym time, and extremely limited programming. Similar quarantine concerns were also reported during JHA's prior post-pandemic visit and survey. The inability to communicate with loved ones was reported to be especially stressful. However, despite these restrictions, women also expressed that quarantine procedures seemed poorly designed to reduce the spread of COVID. For example, although the women spent most of the day restricted inside their rooms cohorted with roommates, they ate meals with others. Throughout the pandemic JHA has heard and reported the hardships and inconsistencies faced by people inside. As the outside world normalizes, the stress and confusion of COVID inside prisons persists and builds, but COVID policies, insofar as they exist, stagnate. Holistic safety—considering reasonable, more localized, or even individualized risks and harms of ongoing lockdowns—seemed too nuanced for prisons to effectuate or communicate, particularly given reported increasing staffing deficits.

Like at most IDOC facilities, staff shortages had reportedly impacted the services and programs at Decatur. At the time of the October 2022 visit, administrators reported they had only about 73% of their authorized security staff and 82% of their authorized non-security staff. IDOC continued to report similar, or worse, shortages across the system into 2023. Decatur staff was reported to be about 43% female. **JHA again stresses that having adequate female staff to supervise incarcerated women is critical in keeping with [human rights guidance](#).** While

some vacancies must be filled, **JHA believes—in light of the significant reduction and changes in IDOC’s population, the Department’s mission shift, and current utilization of facilities—an independent staffing analysis is warranted.** At the least, some internal consideration is needed to ensure that authorized staffing numbers accurately reflect current and predicted needs of the IDOC population. Logical reallocation of resources to better run the facility and provide more out of cell time should be undertaken and supported by management and staff.

IDOC administrators indicated that staffing deficits were responsible for negative impacts on the day-to-day functioning at Decatur. For example, dozens of women reported issues with mail services in their written survey responses. Most women reported that they usually received mail just once a week, and the mail they receive may be weeks delayed. Additionally, many women said that yard and gym time was rarely offered, with multiple women stating that *“there’s never officers to take us to yard or gym.”* In draft review, IDOC further responded that “Yard is only canceled if there are staff shortages, Medical Quarantine, Weather, and if we were to be on a lockdown. During the timeframe Medical Quarantine and Weather were the two biggest reasons for closing of yard.” In draft review, JHA again noted that IDOC reporting of administrative lockdowns does not reflect use of medical quarantines, so there is not a clear public record of the extensive restrictions that have been in place throughout the COVID pandemic. Tracking people’s opportunity for recreation typically otherwise only occurs in restrictive housing settings. Some women noted that healthcare staff was limited, resulting in long wait-times. Such issues have been commonly reported throughout IDOC. **JHA continues to advise that IDOC provide more information to the public about staffing deficits and efforts to address them.**

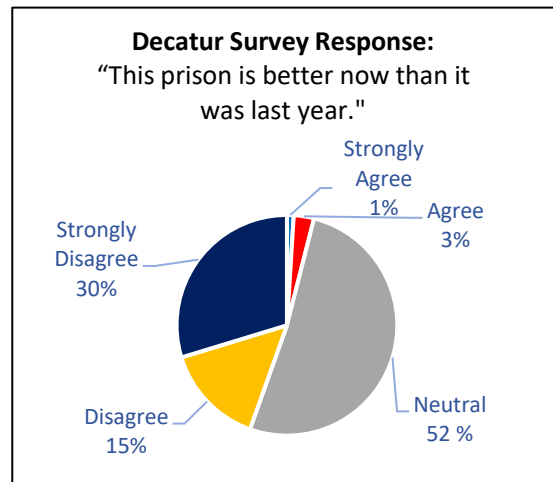
Concerns regarding feeling unsafe due to healthcare concerns or living conditions were shared by some women. In 2022 surveys, 34% of respondents agreed with the statement “This prison is safe for incarcerated people” and 30% disagreed, compared to 55% agreeing and 17% disagreeing in JHA’s pre-COVID 2020 survey. Women were concerned that the healthcare they receive is inadequate, and that medical concerns are often wrongfully dismissed. Poor and





potentially unsafe food options at dietary were also a common frustration potentially impacting people’s health, which was also frequently reported previously. JHA was particularly concerned with Decatur’s water supply issues and the lack of transparency with the administrative response to these issues. Administrative staff informed JHA that Legionella bacteria had been detected in Decatur’s water multiple times in 2022, including once in March and again in August. People in custody at Decatur seemed to learn of the Legionella detections through word of mouth several weeks or months after the initial detection. This made some women anxious that they were not getting accurate and timely information about issues with the prison’s water. In draft review, IDOC responded, “Memos are issued to staff and individuals in custody, advising all of legionella issues. Verbal notifications are also made.” The potentially dangerous water supply at Decatur is unfortunately not a unique issue among IDOC prisons, and JHA is pushing for improvements and transparency regarding the status of IDOC water and sanitation systems. **JHA continues to advocate for a comprehensive assessment of every prison water and sanitation system, and based on the outcome, urges investments in safe water systems or the closure of prisons that do not warrant the investment.**

Programming opportunities at Decatur remained limited, which was brought up in many of our conversations with the women incarcerated there. Administrative staff stated at the time of the visit that they recognized that programming opportunities were scarce and also attributed this problem to staff shortages. Those with longer terms left to serve are particularly impacted by this lack of programming, as programs in IDOC facilities are usually prioritized by outdated. It was encouraging to see that some new programs have been implemented since our last visit, namely, the WestCare substance use disorder treatment program and the Warehousing & Distributing vocational program. However, these programs have limited capacity. In draft review, IDOC provided further some further response regarding Decatur programming as set out in the Productive Activity section of this report.



Scarcity of items at commissary continued to be an issue, which administrative staff attributed to commissary disruptions related to COVID. JHA has reported extensively regarding commissary

issues. Essential items such as underwear and menstrual products were reportedly still difficult to obtain at Decatur. However, during JHA’s 2022 visit, women more often voiced concerns about product quality at commissary, with some women reporting that that personal care products were extremely irritating to their hair and skin. Further, many women said that they are often forced to buy clothing and personal care products that are intended for men. In draft review, IDOC noted in response to concerns that commissary only had products that are male oriented/scented, “we have a 2 in 1 shampoo that is unscented, Coast soap, Sensitive skin Dove, [and] Coco butter soap.”

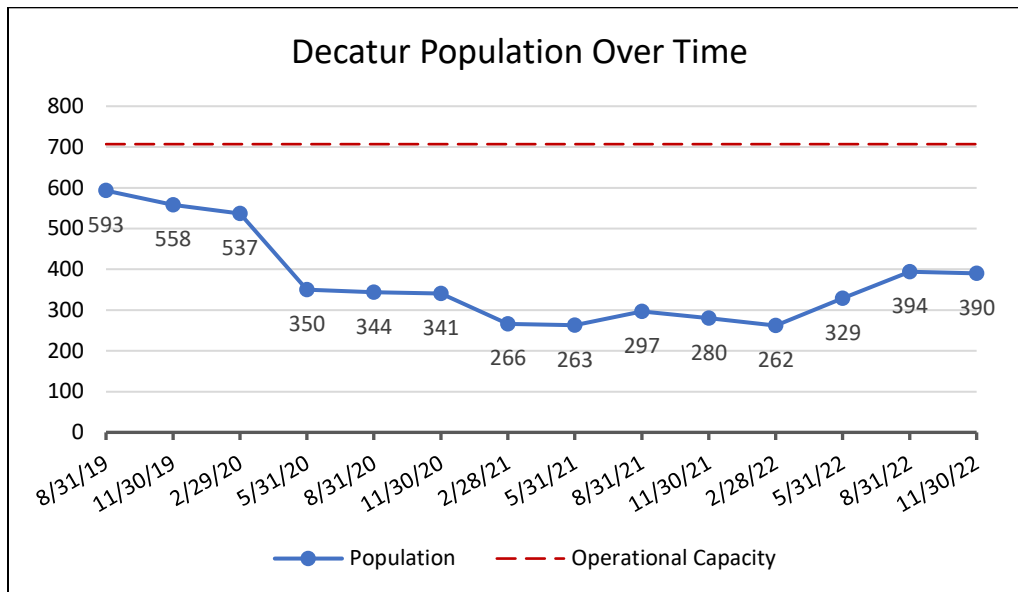
Illinois must address procurement regulations that lead to the increased deprivation and financial detriment of people who are incarcerated. **Prioritization of commissary improvements and increased transparency about how supply issues are being addressed is urgently needed.**

## REPEAT FINDINGS

JHA has documented many of the ongoing 2022 concerns in previous Decatur monitoring reports:

- Issues with receiving mail in a timely manner (2013)
- Harsh and inconsistent COVID procedures (2021)
- Staff treating women disrespectfully (2012)
- Staff favoritism (2013)
- Non-responsiveness to concerns (2013)
- Barriers to accessing information (2013)
- Inadequate healthcare or access (2011)
- Few programming opportunities (2011)
- Limited availability of substance use disorder treatment programs (2011)
- Concerns regarding treatment of new and expecting mothers (2012)
- Pervasive mold and poor ventilation (2020)
- Rodent and insect infestation (2020)
- Limited product availability at commissary (2020)

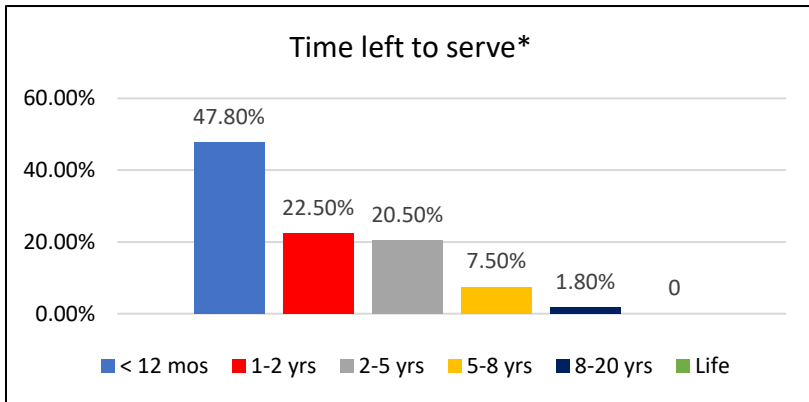
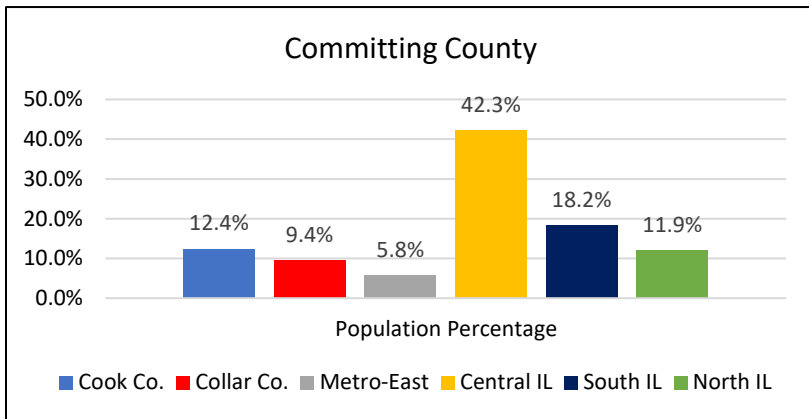
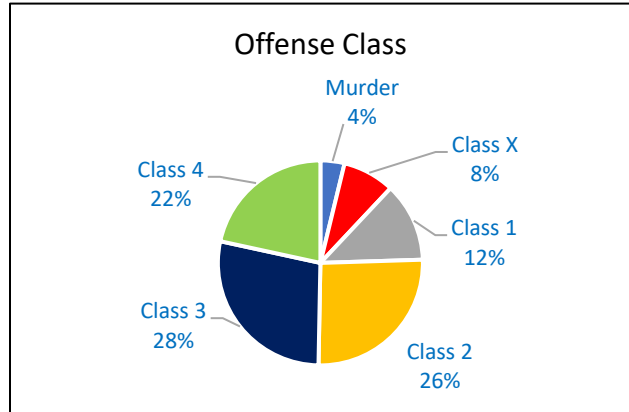
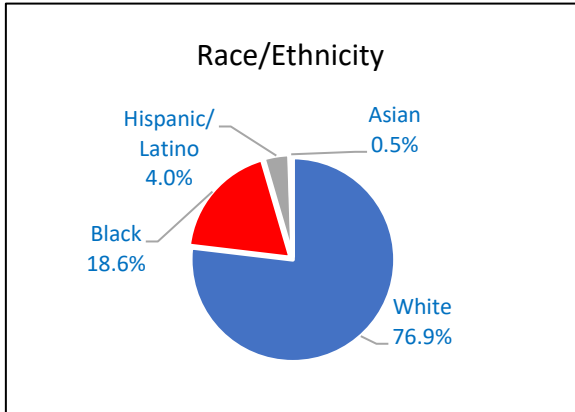
# Population and Demographics



According to data provided by Decatur administrative staff, 398 women were incarcerated at Decatur on September 30, 2022. This represents a 30% increase from the 306 women in custody at Decatur during JHA’s visit in June 2021. While this population is significantly lower than pre-COVID numbers, the upward trend in population was concerning in light of reported staff shortages.

**JHA continues to encourage IDOC work to fill lower security beds and provide more programming at this prison.** The total population of women in IDOC in the second half of 2022 was approximately 1,400. Logan, the other IDOC women’s prison, continued to be crowded with fewer than 1,000 women, as housing areas were closed due to maintenance needs. At the time of JHA’s December 2022 Logan visit, 342 people there, or 34.5% of Logan’s population, were classified as minimum security. Meanwhile, the women’s work release facility, [Fox Valley Adult Transition Center](#), remained at less than 60% of its 128 reported capacity.

**Decatur Demographics as of September 6, 2022, per data provided by IDOC:**



Average Age: 40  
 Individuals Under 25: 4.7%  
 Individuals Over 50: 17.7%

\*The majority of women at Decatur (70.3%) were reported to have less than two years left to serve. However, this data does not reflect the potential application of sentencing credits, which may substantially reduce time left to serve.

# Outside Communication & Visitation

## Mail

Many people in custody at Decatur expressed frustration with the mail system during their conversations with JHA. Additionally, dozens of women who answered our survey indicated issues with mail services in their responses to open-ended questions. Women stated that they were not receiving mail on a regular basis, with many women reporting that they received mail only once a week, if that often. For example, someone commented they *“often go weeks w/o mail.”* When the women are able to receive mail, some stated that postmarks indicated that the mail was sent weeks, or even months, earlier. Further, three women wrote on their surveys that staff members told them that *“mail is a privilege,”* implying that they do not have a right to receive it in a timely fashion.

Infrequent mail service has been an ongoing issue at Decatur. During JHA’s visit to the facility in 2021, women also reported going weeks without mail. Women continued to say in 2022 that writing grievances about mail delivery was ineffective, as grievances were ignored or they were told that the issue was *“not grievable.”* Women at Decatur are understandably frustrated, as mail services are crucial in ensuring that individuals in custody maintain contact with loved ones. Additionally, a few women expressed concerns that their mail was being mishandled, saying that *“legal mail*



### WHAT WOMEN AT DECATUR ARE SAYING ABOUT MAIL

“Our mail is weeks behind due to staffing problems. Please help us!”

“If we are not getting any mail in, that means our family is not getting ours either. That hurts.”

“We are currently 7 days without outside mail”

“Never getting mail b/c there is no mail officer - only getting mail once a week”

“They need to have the mail officer and chaplain replaced ASAP. Not getting mail from family is unacceptable”

“Mail is 3-4 weeks being [behind] because they refuse to staff the mailroom but have multiple guards sitting all day in dietary”

“We are not receiving any mail, no legal or family mail either. We’re being told it’s because of short staffing. But at lunch time there are more than 10 C/O sitting in the chow hall talking having fun.”

“They never give us mail. When we receive it, it is from months previous, and legal mail is always opened”

“A mailroom officer needs to be hired”

“We often go weeks w/o mail”

*is always open.*” In their conversations with JHA, two women also said that they never received a response to their letters to us. This is unusual, because while JHA has not had capacity to send individualized responses to everyone who writes to us, we do send each person a reply letter to confirm receipt.

Administrative staff did not agree that issues with mail were this severe, stating that mail had been processed 16 out of the 20 days leading up to the JHA visit. It was unclear if mail processing included mail delivery. They further stated that mail is delivered on the 3pm-11pm shift, but only when there is someone in the mailroom. Decatur staff informed JHA that though they did not have a permanent officer in the mailroom at the time of our visit, there were two officers who were “temporarily assigned.” Reportedly, these two officers were the only ones at Decatur trained to work there.

These administrators also stressed that they understood the importance of mail to people in custody, stating “Mail is a right, not a privilege,” which is in contrast to what some of the women reported they were told by staff members. Mail is an essential service for people in custody. Though addressing staff shortages has been a challenge for all IDOC facilities, staffing mailrooms should be a priority. **JHA again advised that improving the mail system is crucial for protecting the well-being of the women at Decatur and should be addressed immediately.** JHA was pleased to hear during March 2023 draft review that a mailroom officer had been hired since our September 2022 visit, and IDOC administrators stated that there was no longer a backlog on mail delivery. We hope that staffing the mailroom will continue to be a priority at Decatur moving forward.

## Phones

Several women reported via surveys that they were given very little time to use the phone during quarantine, stating that they were often allotted twenty minutes out of their rooms to both use the phone and shower each day. There were also reports of long waits to add people to phone lists, which was a concern during JHA’s [2021 visit](#) to Decatur as well. **JHA [continues to recommend](#) that prisons prioritize ensuring outside communication access and devote staff to approving phone lists, e-messaging, video-visitation, mail, visitors, etc.** A few women also expressed a general frustration with the phone system, provided by vendor [Securus](#), finding it unreliable. One woman told JHA that phone numbers “*won’t work.*” She

further reported that Securus and the prison are “*pointing the finger at each other,*” and issues were not getting fixed.

Women also reported that those on B or C Grade privilege restrictions were only permitted two phone calls a week. These restrictions on communication are less harsh than what is permitted [under the Administrative Code](#), but are nevertheless distressing to those assigned these grades. Further, JHA is concerned that women may not have adequate notice of these rules and possible restrictions on communication, as we often receive requests from individuals in custody for [IDOC’s Department Rule 504: Discipline and Grievances](#). In draft review, IDOC responded that people at Decatur on B grade may make two calls within a 30-day period, and those on C grade may not make any calls; “[h]owever, during COVID restrictions, individuals in B and C grade were allowed to make four calls a month. 2 calls between the 1st and the 15th, and 2 calls between the 15th and the end of the month.”

---

*“I don't think it's right that staff uses limiting phone calls as punishment. . . I have been "c" grade for 4 months and now "B" grade which I must do 5 months of and it limits me to only allowed 2 phone calls a week. They block family and friends from my e-mail as well and that also limits me from talking to my supportive loved ones!”*

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

Near the beginning of the pandemic, IDOC waived restricting phone use based on grade level, which indicates that such restrictions are not necessary for prison security. We believe that not restricting communications due to grade level should be the norm, rather than the exception. Regular phone access is an essential component of maintaining connections with loved ones and should not be treated as a “privilege” subject to restriction. Further, apart from attorney-client calls, all calls from people in prison can be monitored. Security-related concerns therefore do not seem to justify these restrictions on phone use. **JHA [continues to recommend](#) that phone calls not be restricted as a disciplinary measure.**

## Visitation

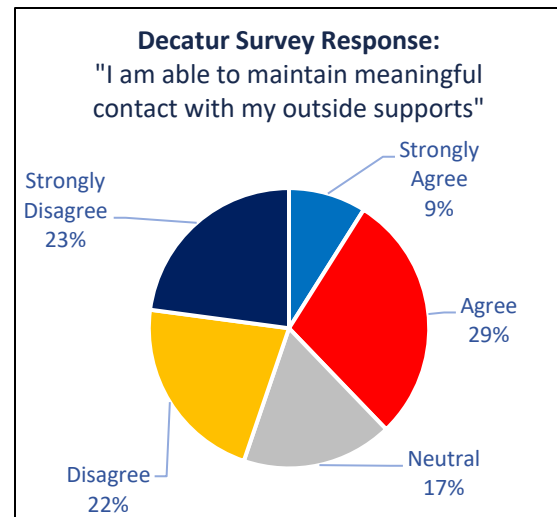
[Visitation rules](#) for IDOC facilities have been altered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person visits were not allowed during facility quarantines, which is discussed in more detail in this report's [section on COVID](#). As of our visit in October 2022, visitors over the age of two were reportedly still required to wear a mask and undergo a COVID-19 symptom and temperature screening. Visitors over the age of five were also required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 unless they have a medical or religious exemption. IDOC facilities required visitors to schedule a visit time in advance using [SignUpGenius](#), an online scheduling tool. Administrators remarked that the shift to online advanced scheduling has been very beneficial, though they also mentioned that a glitch several weeks prior had erased scheduled visits, which was concerning.

At Decatur, administrators reported that people in custody who are under no disciplinary restrictions

could have contact visits up to three times a month, and each visit reportedly could last two hours. Non-contact visits are used as a form of discipline and could be scheduled two times a month for one hour each visit.

The Decatur visitation area has a private room for breastfeeding, as well as a play area for visiting children. Concerningly, some women commented in a survey response and during the JHA visit that staff were not letting them breastfeed their infants during visits, despite having a private room to do so. JHA raised this issue to IDOC administrators prior to the October 2022 visit and was discouraged to hear the concern repeated on the visit. The ACLU of Illinois had [reported](#) this as an issue at Logan in July 2019. Women continue to experience obstacles to breastfeeding in prison, which is discussed further in this report's [section on pregnancy in prison](#).

Some women expressed frustration with the IDOC visitor approval process, which was generally perceived as burdensome and slow. Three women wrote in survey responses that their loved ones were denied at the door when they came to visit for reasons that they did not understand,





which can be especially upsetting for those who must travel a long way. One woman wrote *“you claim to be ‘family oriented’ yet I cant get a visit from you own daughter + grandkid or my fiance, who is approved at other IDOC facilities.”* Other women reported in their survey comments that the approval process was taking an unusual amount of time, perhaps also relating to staff shortages. Further, women voiced disagreement with the [IDOC restrictions](#) on people with criminal records, which requires them to obtain written approval from the IDOC Chief Administrative Officer (Warden) before visiting. In addition to being perceived as unreasonably slow, some believed that this approval process was harsh. For example, one woman wrote that her friend whose record was expunged was nevertheless denied as a visitor. Visitors must go through screening and visits are monitored, which should mitigate possible security concerns regarding people who have prior convictions. The importance of maintaining outside contacts and supports must be weighed against actual risk posed by a person’s criminal history.

Going without visits from loved ones can be harmful to the mental health of those in custody as well as to their outside supports. **JHA recommends that efforts are made to ensure that the visitor approval process is efficient and not unduly burdensome.**

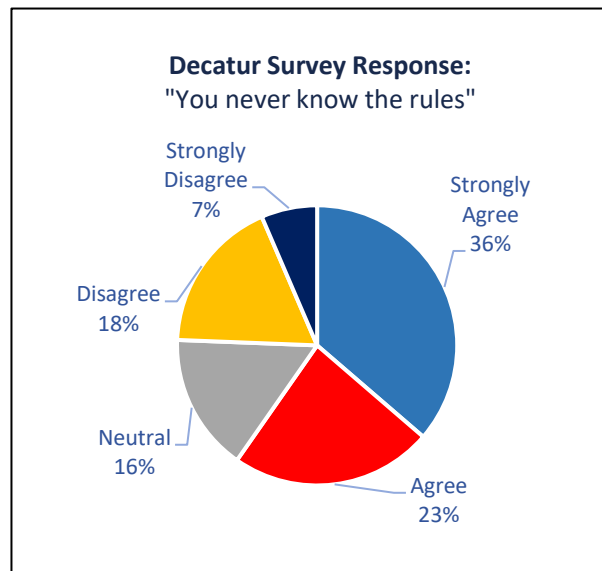
*“They make it hard to visit with your support and family. It takes a long time to get approved and the visitor restrictions are harsh especially for people whose family members have been an inmate before.” – Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022*

## Discipline

Per [IDOC data](#), Decatur reported ten disciplinary segregation placements during fiscal year 2022 (July 1, 2021-June 30, 2022) and nine disciplinary transfers to Logan. During JHA’s October 2022 visit to the prison, no one was housed in the restrictive housing unit, but JHA visited the area. Staff said the dayroom area would soon have a TV. Administrative staff was very proud of this unit, stating that it was one of the best out of all IDOC prisons. Staff stated to JHA that IDOC restrictive housing policies will be evaluated by the federal [Bureau of Justice Assistance](#) in the near future. JHA is pleased to see use of restrictive housing decrease over

recent years, and notes IDOC’s [revised policy](#) on restrictive housing mandates use of progressive discipline.

However, we continued to hear that the issuance of disciplinary sanctions, including lesser sanctions than use of restrictive housing, was unfair and inconsistent at Decatur. As outlined in this report’s later section on [Favoritism and Discrimination](#), many women stated that the severity of sanctions depends on the officer issuing the sanction. As put by one individual in custody, *“COs makes their own rules, so every time a new person comes to work their shift, rules*

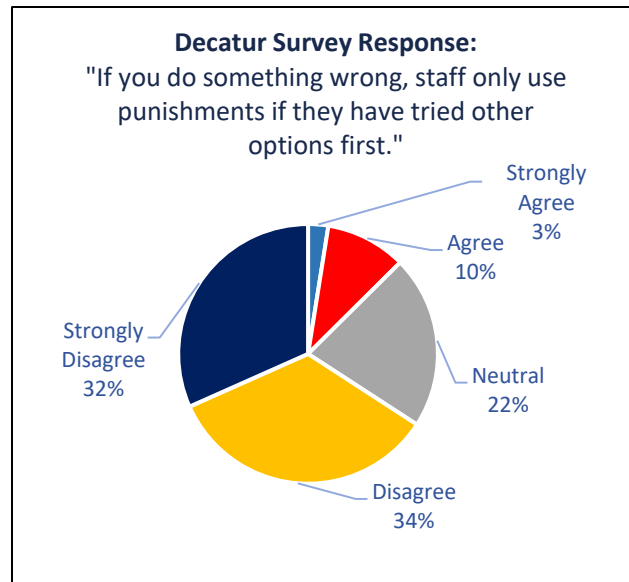


*change, privileges come and go. Schedules exists or not. Punishments are extremely inconsistent.”* **JHA continues to emphasize the importance of applying disciplinary sanctions fairly and with adequate notice.** It is critical for incarcerated people to have notice of relevant rules and their consequences, and for sanctions to be applied fairly. Prison discipline can impose life-changing, significant restrictions. For example, one woman wrote, *“They took my whole year of good time over a crime I did not commit nor did they have proof of the crime. When you are “C” or “B” grade you cannot contact your family but 2 phone calls a week and you cannot order food, clothes, etc.”* Again, JHA opposes restricting communication for discipline.

*“There’s a lot of COs who just like to write tickets if they having bad days but the ticket follow us and causes us obstacles”*  
—Individual in Custody at Decatur, 2022

Officers being too quick to discipline was also commonly reported during the visit and in survey responses. As put by one survey respondent, *“everything is ticket, ticket, ticket.”* One woman wrote that she was given a ticket for merely laughing. Someone JHA spoke with on the visit said that she was once written up for *“reckless eyeballing.”* This example was concerning because it seems entirely subjective. Another woman said that she was given 14 days in restrictive housing and two months on B-grade for possessing an over-the-counter pain reliever without permission. This possibly could [qualify](#) as possessing an unauthorized drug under IDOC rules

if it was “unidentifiable,” and thus this sanction would be permissible under the administrative code. However, possession of over-the counter pain relievers may be permitted under some circumstances. If permission was not given, possession of small amounts would likely not warrant such a harsh sanction. **Again, the use of progressive discipline is recommended per IDOC policy to avoid overly severe punishments.**

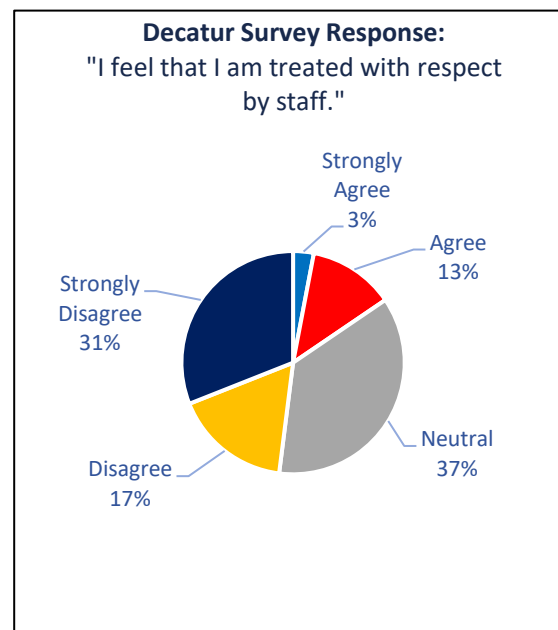


There was also a concerning reported perception that some officers enjoy holding their disciplinary power over the heads of people in custody and even want to delay their outdates by denying or revoking sentencing credits. For example, one woman wrote in a survey response that *“all they want to do is take days from people. They want people to get in trouble.”*

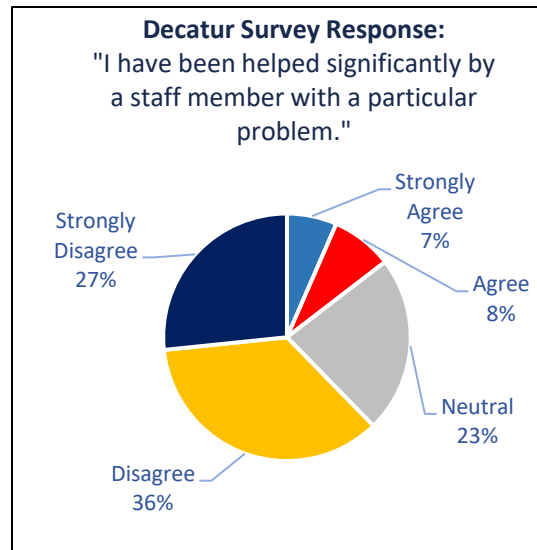
## Issues Related to Staff

### Lack of Professionalism

A significant number of survey respondents and people who spoke with JHA mentioned a lack of professionalism harming their relationship with staff. One of the most common sentiments was that staff members do not treat them like people. For example, women reported that they were being treated like *“disgusting vermin who don't deserve anything”* and *“caged animals.”* JHA also continued to hear reports of staff speaking to women like they were not human. One woman said that she had been told *“you're not a person, you're a number.”* Yet another woman said that



some officers would speak to them like dogs, even giving them commands such as “go lie down.” Some individuals reported that certain named staff members would swear or “scream” at them and refer to them as “bitches.” Commissary staff in particular were reported to be aggressive toward those in custody during our 2020 visit and discouragingly again in 2022. One woman emphasized that aggressive behavior from male staff members, such as raised voices and vulgar language, was particularly hard on women who



had traumatic experiences with men in the past. Some women expressed that they did not want to file grievances about staff behavior for fear of retaliation, such as being re-assigned to a less desirable work assignment. In draft review, IDOC responded, “If a complaint of staff using derogatory, foul language towards individuals was made, this complaint would be reviewed. If substantiated, depending on the severity, more training or discipline would enacted.”

Though many women indicated that their overall experience with Decatur staff has been negative, some women did tell us about staff members who were kind to people in custody and sincerely cared about their well-being. For example, women stated that there were “some great Cos,” and dedicated counselors in the WestCare program. One woman acknowledged a particular officer who always “tries to help as much as he can.” Teachers for the academic programs earned some high praise, with several women noting that the teachers at Decatur were one of the most positive parts of their experience.

“Some staff (the ‘good’ ones) are FAR overworked while the disrespectful and all around angry, robotic staff get what they want.”  
 —Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

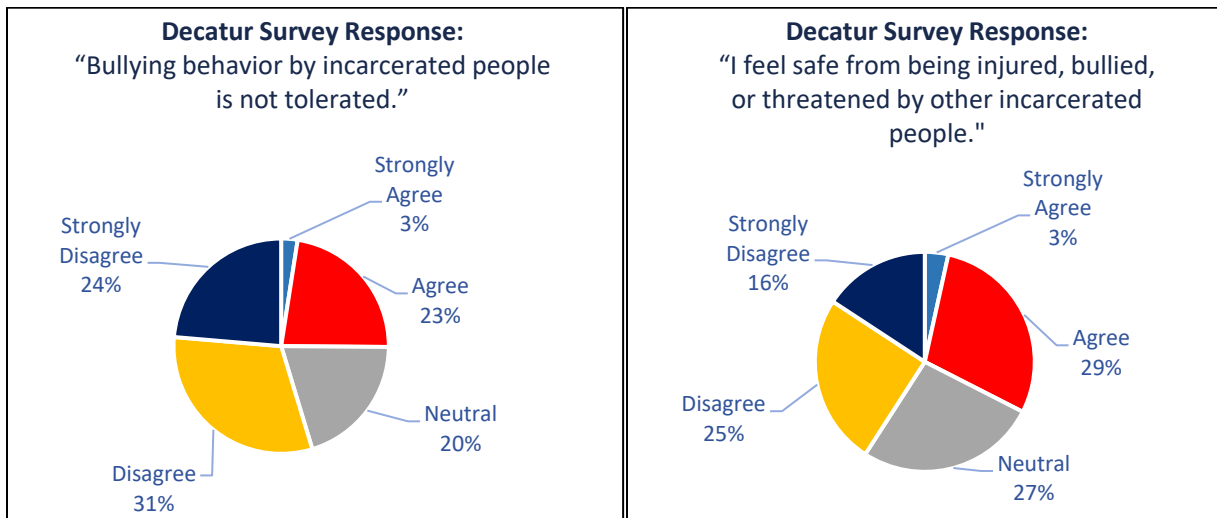
However, there seems to be a culture that discourages staff members from treating people in custody with respect. One woman wrote, “If an officer helped us, their fellow officers would belittle them and call them ‘inmate lovers.’” Another woman noted that one staff member who was “very receptive and really helps out” is “swamped all of the time because she’s about the only one who cares.”

**Implementing policies and practices to promote professional behavior by staff is critical to achieving necessary culture change.**

# Non-responsiveness

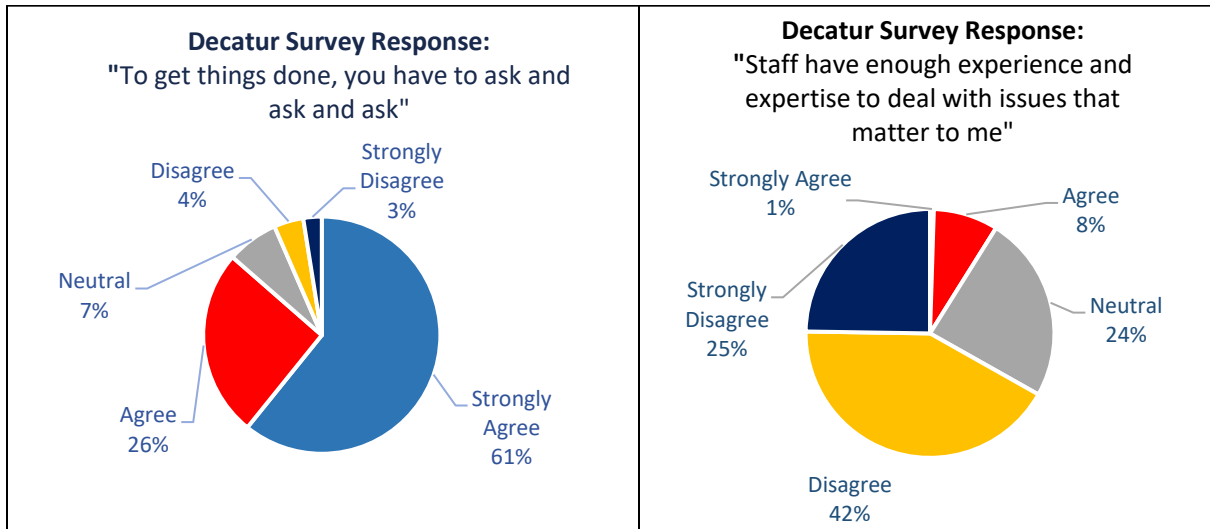
Non-responsiveness from staff members was a very common issue that we again heard from the women at Decatur. Specifically, women voiced that staff members failed to intervene in conflicts among individuals in custody, were unable or unwilling to provide important information when requested, and often did not respond to request slips or grievances.

## Failure to Intervene



Some women felt that staff members did the bare minimum and failed to respond to requests for assistance. In particular, several women reported feeling unsafe because staff was unresponsive to reports of threats and bullying. During JHA’s visit, one woman said that she told Decatur staff that she *“feared for [her] life”* after getting into a fight with someone on her unit. She was then disappointed and afraid when staff did not do anything to ensure her safety. This also was an issue for a woman who filed multiple grievances about being bullied by her cellmate. After receiving no response, she spoke to a staff member and was merely told, *“She is just testing you. Stand your ground.”* Staff encouraging women to fight each other was reported by at least five other women via survey responses as well. For example, one woman wrote that staff will *“make it a game out of turning inmate against inmate.”* Another woman wrote, *“When you go to staff about another individual in custody (elderly lady) that you are having problems with, they tell you to beat her up in order for anything to be done!”* IDOC administrators responded to these reports in draft review stating, *“We aim to provide the safest environment possible. Allegations are investigated in house or referred for external investigation as needed.”*

## Issues Obtaining Information from Staff



During JHA’s visit, women indicated that submitting request slips, or “dropping slips,” was an ineffective method for receiving assistance or information. **Though reported staff shortages may have impacted the ability to promptly respond, efforts must be made to get the women at Decatur the information they need and resolutions to their concerns.** The unanswered questions that many of the women have, such as those concerning sentencing credits, can have a major impact on their lives. Individuals in custody are often forced to turn to outside organizations to get their questions answered, which can pose a problem when time is of the essence. **A better system of communication should be pursued to respond to the needs and concerns of people in custody.**

The women JHA spoke with also stated that correctional counselors are often unavailable or unresponsive to women that go to them for help. Similar such issues with counselors have also commonly been reported in the past. One woman reported she has not been able to speak with a counselor for four months. Another person wrote on her survey that a particular counselor *“refuses to interact with us during our scheduled time,”* therefore their *“questions go unanswered because he doesn’t want to be bothered with us.”* This was also reported to us by another woman who stated that the same counselor would refuse to acknowledge her during their meetings as if she was not in the room.

When women are able to speak with counselors, there are reported issues with staff being uninformed about policies and rules relevant to individuals in custody. As reported by one woman, “*non-security staff are so inconsistent and usually don't know what they are talking about.*” In particular, several women were frustrated that no one could explain how to get into work release programs or why they had not been granted expected [Earned Discretionary Sentencing Credit \(EDSC\)](#). As EDSC is discretionary, there is commonly not a knowable, concrete or satisfying response. While some factors that preclude people from eligibility under law can be deciphered, application of credits is often perceived as unpredictable.

---

*“Get a new system for the "Drop a slip" system. It sucks and never gets responses or Just thrown away. There has to be a better way to communicate.”*

—Individual in custody  
at Decatur, 2022

Other women reported difficulty with getting information about programming sentence credits. For example, one woman said that she had been working in dietary for months, but had not yet received any sentence credit. She said she spoke to her counselor multiple times about the issue, only to have him repeatedly say “I don’t know.” Uncertainty surrounding sentencing credits and other mechanisms for early release are a major stressor for people within IDOC, as JHA has continually reported, especially when there have been changes to the sentencing credit policy.

Some women also reported anxiety about whether paperwork for early release programs, such as [work release](#) or electronic monitoring/detention (ED), was being submitted by staff. As of August 31, 2022, there were only 72 women at the Fox Valley work release center, about five percent of the nearly [1,400 women in IDOC](#). Further, only 12 people, possibly including men, were reported to be on ED out of IDOC’s entire 29,395 population, which would represent less than one percent of incarcerated women. JHA believes people should be in the least restrictive safe classification providing the greatest opportunity for successful reintegration to the community. **Underutilization of early release programs in general and during the ongoing pandemic continues to be a concern.** Further, people in custody seem to be uninformed about the actual availability and utilization of these opportunities.

Potential failure by staff to submit paperwork causes great anxiety for people in custody because they may become ineligible for some programs if enough time passes. In response to our survey question asking about the worst part of their prison experience, one woman wrote, *“Neglect of duties from the staff not putting our paperwork in for house arrest, work release, or SSC [now EDSC] Days and then waiting till we are too short to not be eligible because they did not do their job in a timely fashion.”*

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in black ink and reads: "I have been asking to be put in for ED because they claim I'm too short for work release and they will not even submit me." The note is slightly crumpled and has a white border.

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

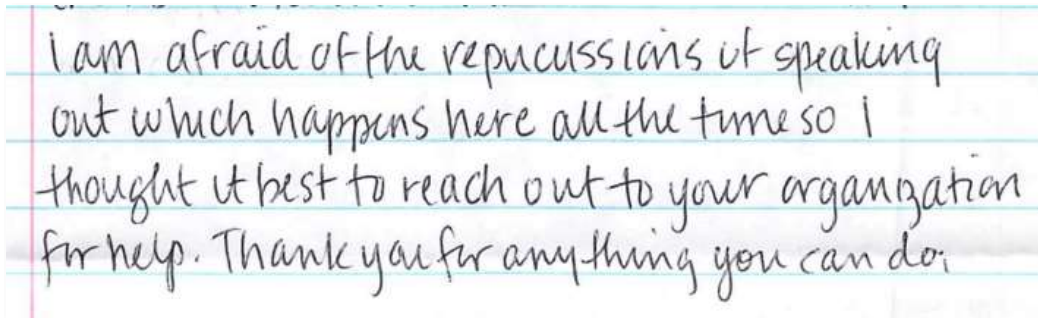
Because staff may be unable or unwilling to help provide information, women may try searching for certain information in the prison library, discussed below, when they have access. Not having ready access to accurate information likely causes misinformation to spread, which furthers the stress surrounding the early release process. **Being able to easily obtain accurate information about early release opportunities—both via staff assistance and independent research endeavors—is important for people in custody. Avenues to get this information must be increased and made more easily accessible.**

## **Non-responsiveness to Grievances**

Women reported they filed grievances about various things, such as to get staff to intervene in bullying situations, to address untreated medical concerns, and regarding early release issues. However, multiple women expressed frustration regarding the lack of response to their grievances, stating that the grievance system *“gives false hope.”* Other women expressed that they did not want to file grievances about staff behavior for fear of retaliation, such as being reassigned to a less desirable work assignment or receiving an unwarranted ticket. For example, one woman wrote that a staff member who supervised her work assignment was behaving aggressively toward her, but she was reluctant to file a grievance because *“If we grieve CO we will face blow back of being reassigned.”* This fear of retaliation is commonly



reported. In particular, women were concerned that if a grievance involved the behavior of a staff member, that staff member would be informed of the content of the grievance and who wrote it. However, it is commonly part of the grievance process that an investigation of a grievance will involve a staff interview about what is reported to have occurred.



I am afraid of the repercussions of speaking out which happens here all the time so I thought it best to reach out to your organization for help. Thank you for anything you can do.

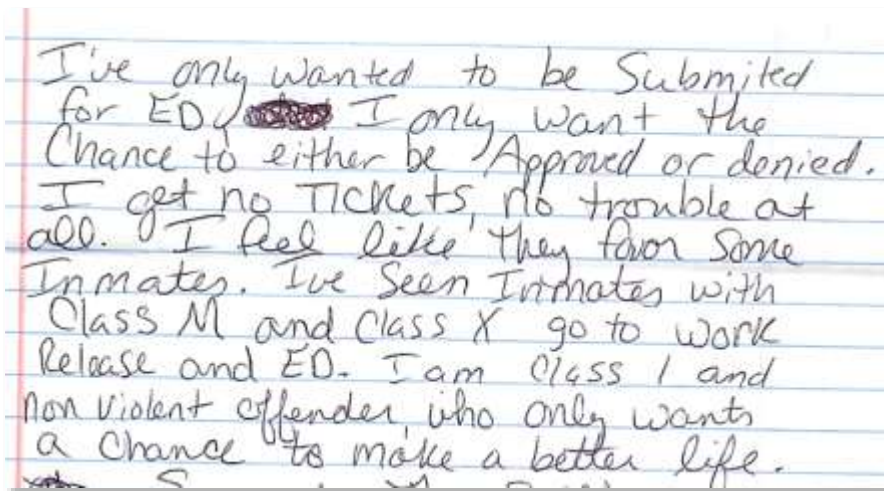
—Individual in Custody at Decatur, 2022

JHA was told that in 2021 there were 983 grievances filed with 237 completed as emergency grievances. From January to August 2022 there were 564 grievances filed at Decatur with 112 completed as emergency grievances. However, we were not provided with any information about the outcome of these grievances, which we typically receive. From the information provided, we could observe a substantial uptick in grievances in August 2022, corresponding with the quarantine, with 168 grievances filed and 31 treated as emergencies. The table included here demonstrates how grievances for the month of August 2022 were categorized.

August 2022 Grievances			
Staff Conduct	34	Programs – Assignments	15
Mail	27	Sentence Credits	8
Conditions	21	Personal Property	6
Trust Funds (most related to Commissary)	17	Dietary	4
Medical	16	Other	2
Visitation (most related to Video Visitation)	16	Disciplinary Sanctions	1

People incarcerated in IDOC prisons have long reported that the grievance system is ineffective, slow, and that filing grievances may lead to retaliation. In May 2021, IDOC established and filled a Chief Inspector position for the first time, which was created with the intent of improving the grievance system. As of December 2022, there had been limited updates from IDOC about the status of this project and the agency was again filling the position after the first Chief Inspector was promoted. JHA will continue to follow up with administrators and advocate for improvements to the grievance system. In draft review, IDOC administrators stated that counselors are now documenting hearing results in both CHAMP (a system for tracking counselor contacts) and on a tracking log.

## Discrimination & Favoritism



I've only wanted to be Submitted for ED. I only want the chance to either be Approved or denied. I get no TICKETS, no trouble at all. I feel like they favor some Inmates. I've seen Inmates with Class M and Class X go to work Release and ED. I am Class I and non violent offender, who only wants a chance to make a better life.

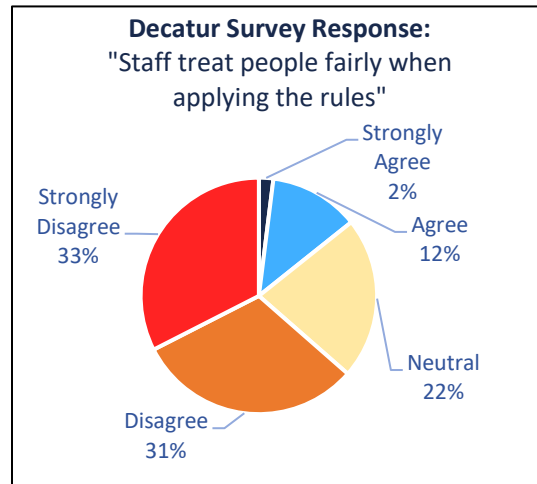
—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

*“I think that C.O.’s do treat some people better than others and of course have favorites. I’m treated fine because I obey the rules and keep mostly to myself. I do see some inmates getting away with things that others aren’t allowed. Everyone should be treated equally.”* —Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

Some of the reported confusion and stress about early release programs and granting of EDSC related to what was seen as unfair application. Additionally, several women at Decatur

emphasized that the inconsistent enforcement of rules was a regular stressor in their daily lives, reporting that staff members “*pick and choose when to enforce rules*” such that individuals in custody are never sure what is and is not allowed. One woman gave the example of a small pin that she wore, which one staff member made her remove despite others allowing it. The issue of staff disciplining minor infractions for some women while turning a blind eye to others was also commonly reported during [JHA’s last visit to Decatur](#).

Women perceived inconsistent enforcement to be rooted in favoritism; for example, one woman wrote that staff will “*ALWAYS let certain people get away with murder.*” When asked if a certain type of person is typically a “*favorite,*” one woman stated that they were usually people who had been in custody for a long time. Another woman said that “*snitching*” on the activities of others led to positive treatment from staff. One survey respondent also believes that favoritism impacts who gets into coveted programs,



such as road crew, writing that the women who get into these programs “*are the chosen few of two of the wardens.*” There was a common perception that favoritism affected who received opportunities such as work release; some women were told that they were denied work release due to their criminal history, but also reported that others with similar backgrounds had been approved. Favoritism also reportedly affected the ability of women to seek redress for issues with other individuals in custody. For example, one woman asserted that administrative staff has favorites among those in custody, and they almost always believed the favorite’s account of an incident.

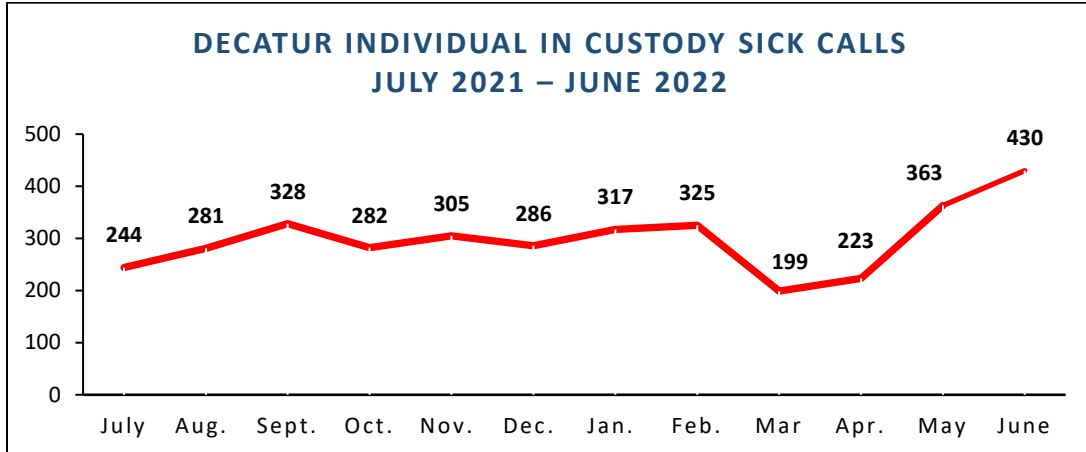
Discrimination was also perceived as contributing to the disparate treatment of people in custody. One woman commented on her survey that staff “*discriminate[s] against gay people.*” Someone JHA spoke to on the visit said that staff would regularly “*separate people from their girlfriends,*” and only put them back on the same unit if they “*snitched*” on other people in custody. Another woman wrote that certain staff members “*treat black people worse,*” and someone else told JHA that Black women often are wrongly labeled as the aggressors in physical altercations.

Another woman told us that there are limits on the number of Black individuals who can be housed together because, according to what she heard from staff, people of color will “*cause chaos*” if housed together. We also spoke to a Black woman who said that she was moved to a different unit for no apparent reason, and she believes it was due to racial profiling. Further, a survey response stated that staff will routinely “*put 2 Whites with 1 Black*” in housing. This “racial balancing” arrangement was also reported to us in 2020, at which time the Decatur administrators stated that “Decatur Correctional Center is predominantly Caucasian at 71.5%. The balancing is done statewide for the safety and security of all facilities. This is done to assist in preventing discrimination, gang issues, etc.” It should be noted that very few women at Decatur are identified as having gang affiliations; per September 9, 2022 population data, only 11 women were designated by IDOC as gang-affiliated. One woman reported a similar “balancing” procedure for program involvement, alleging that “*non-whites are more likely to be able to get into programs/classes/work assignments*” because they are a minority at Decatur. The IDOC has adopted an [Administrative Directive](#) regarding disparate treatment of individuals in custody. Notably, the directive provides that both housing and program assignments “*shall be filled in a manner free of discrimination, bias, or any other action that contributes to or perpetuates disparate treatment based on race, color or ethnicity.*” **Staff should ensure that this directive is followed. Further, JHA recommends that IDOC regularly inform the public about compliance with this directive to enhance accountability.**

In response to the concern that Black individuals are offered more programming opportunities, IDOC administrators stated in draft review that program participation requires that “Individuals in Custody must meet certain criteria. For instance, the Academic Department provides TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) testing to all individuals who enter the institution with two or more years on their sentence. TABE testing determines eligibility for Academic and Vocational programming.” They note that most vocational classes offered through Lake Land College require Individuals in Custody to have a TABE score of 6.0 or 8.0 or higher to qualify, with Manufacturing requiring an 8.0 TABE or higher, and a GED or High School Diploma to enroll. Further, they state “The criteria for other programming may include out date, discipline, and job assignment.”

# Healthcare

## General Healthcare



Women reported varied experiences with healthcare at Decatur. A few women told us that they thought that Decatur had “OK,” “good”, or “slow, but good” medical care. Others deemed it “horrible” and “inadequate.” At the time of the JHA visit, there was one doctor at Decatur, and one eye doctor and one dentist were shared between Decatur and Logan. Healthcare staffing in IDOC, which is primarily provided by contractual vendor [Wexford](#), generally has been poor. Multiple openings have been listed for various healthcare positions at Decatur on the vendor’s website, including for nursing, mental health and dental services.

Several women at Decatur expressed frustration that they were often unable to see the doctor. One woman told us that she had a “really serious” health concern and had to go to sick call three times before being seen by the doctor. Nurses not referring people to doctor sick call until they had been seen three times for an issue is commonly reported. Another person said that because there was only one doctor, “it can take a month and a half” to see them, during which time one’s condition worsens.

During our post-visit debrief with administrative staff, JHA asked about the waiting period to see a doctor as opposed to a nurse. Staff responded that their doctor reviews the medical charts of individuals in custody after they see a nurse, and the doctor determines whether they need to see that individual for a follow-up. If person is evaluated for the same complaint three times in a

30-day period, they will automatically be referred to the doctor for evaluation. Staff explained that this procedure was legislatively mandated. However, we are unaware of such a mandate. There also seems to be some confusion about the three-visit rule, with some women believing that three visits with the nurse are *always* required before seeing a doctor, regardless of the medical concern.

Individuals in custody at Decatur also asserted that their medical concerns were sometimes wrongfully dismissed or ignored, which can result in more serious medical issues. People commented that nurses accuse people of faking medical issues. Others reported receiving inadequate or even harmful care. A woman in her thirties told JHA that she has undergone multiple surgeries due to medical neglect. She said she was placed in the infirmary “*vomiting bile*” and urinating herself for days before she was transported to a hospital, where she was diagnosed with sepsis. This woman also reported that when she returned to the prison weeks later and experienced further symptoms, she was only given TUMS by the facility doctor. She was later transported to the hospital and diagnosed with sepsis again. Another person in custody told JHA that a nurse accidentally put a cleaning chemical in her eye instead of eyedrops, and she can no longer see out of that eye.

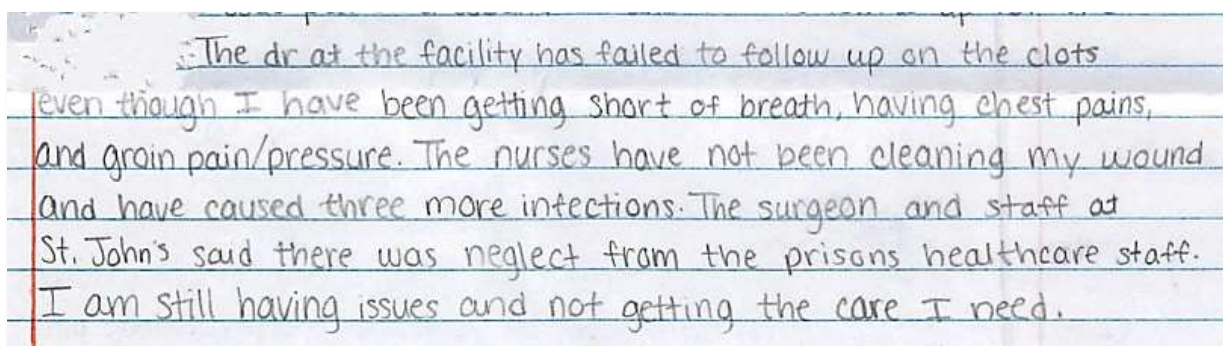
---

Someone wrote on her survey that her friend went to healthcare multiple times with severe pain, only to be told by nurses that she was “faking it.” This friend was later diagnosed with cancer that spread. We spoke to the woman who wrote this during our visit, and she told us that her friend’s cancer was terminal and she had been discharged to die at home. This report was corroborated by other women at Decatur, who were very saddened at this loss of life.

Other women reported unaddressed conditions such as numb feet and chronic chest pain. Failure to obtain sufficient pain management was a commonly reported experience, as in other prisons. Three women said that they were only given Tylenol when they sought help for significant pain. One of these women said that she still had pain after sustaining an injury on road crew a month prior, but was given Tylenol and sent away because the nurses “*aren’t allowed to give you anything else.*” This issue has been reported at Decatur since at least 2013.

For example, as reported during that JHA visit, someone commented that nurses would “[treat everything with ibuprofen or as a yeast infection.](#)”

We also received complaints of unprofessional behavior from healthcare staff. For example, one person wrote that “[healthcare nurses are rude, malicious.](#)” Again, issues with healthcare staff treating women with disrespect has been consistently reported to and by JHA for more than a decade. It is important that all staff treat people in custody with respect, but it is especially important that healthcare staff do so. Otherwise, individuals in custody may be reluctant to seek needed medical care, likely resulting in worsening conditions.



The dr at the facility has failed to follow up on the clots even though I have been getting short of breath, having chest pains, and groin pain/pressure. The nurses have not been cleaning my wound and have caused three more infections. The surgeon and staff at St. John's said there was neglect from the prisons healthcare staff. I am still having issues and not getting the care I need.

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

Two women expressed that they were disappointed with the inability to get physical therapy. One person wrote, “[can we get some physical therapy here; some people have serious bone & body deficiencies that need some care.](#)” A woman we spoke with stated that she still experienced pain from a fracture she received last year; she believed she needed physical therapy but was unable to get an appointment. **As JHA has repeatedly [recommended](#), given IDOC’s aging population, there need to be better options for such healthcare needs.** Using [JHA’s data visualization tools](#), we can see that as of September 30, 2022, 252 women in IDOC (17.7%) were 50 or older, which is generally considered elderly in prison; this increased from 13.22% 10 years prior. IDOC reports in annual [fact sheets](#) that the average age of women in the population had increased to 39.5 years old as of June 30, 2022 (compared to 40 for men and the IDOC population as a whole) from 37.3 years old as of June 30, 2016.

Inadequate medical and dental care in IDOC is the subject of the ongoing [Lippert](#) class action lawsuit. This lawsuit was filed in 2010, and the court entered a [consent decree](#) in May 2019.

Improvements in IDOC healthcare as a result have been slow; per the court-appointed *Lippert* Monitor’s [June 2022 report](#), “IDOC has demonstrated an unwillingness to accept recommendations of the Monitor that provide a meaningful path toward compliance with the Consent Decree.”

## Eyecare and Dental

We received varied reports about eyecare at Decatur. One woman said that she was happy with the wait time for eyecare; she had an eye exam on Monday, and then had an appointment to get glasses on Wednesday. In contrast, another woman said that she had an eye exam and was told that she needed glasses, but was still waiting to get glasses four months later. According to one woman, eyeglasses are paid for by the prison and people can get their eyes checked once a year.

The women incarcerated at Decatur generally expressed dissatisfaction with dental services. The most common complaint was long wait times to be seen by a dentist. One person wrote, *“In the 3yr I have been here I haven't had my teeth cleaned, a filling, no proper dental.”* Another person stated that she cracked her tooth two months prior and was still waiting to be seen. Someone told us during our visit that regular teeth cleanings never happened because there was no hygienist. This is a common report in IDOC prisons; per the [June 2022 Lippert](#) monitoring report, eight IDOC facilities did not have a dental hygienist on staff, resulting in 38% of the IDOC population failing to receive dental hygiene services. However, this woman also heard that the dentist was getting an assistant and was thus hopeful for improvements. When women do receive dental care, we had some reports of the care being less than community standards. For example, one woman told us that she had been waiting over two years for a dental filling because the dentist will offer to pull teeth, but not fix them, which is a commonly reported issue in IDOC. A similar experience was reported by a woman who said that when she was experiencing some irritation from her braces, the dentist wanted to take off her braces entirely

*“I am sure other prisons are under staffed, but taking it out on us is not our fault you are working 16 hours, or 7 days a week. We would just like proper medical/dental care, and be treated with respect how we have to treat others.”* —

Individual in custody at  
Decatur, 2022



rather than fix them. Increasing dental staff and improving dental care services is also mandated in the *Lippert* consent decree.

## Mental Health

The mental health caseload at Decatur was 281 in [June 2022](#), or approximately 63% of the population. 17% of individuals at Decatur were designated as Seriously Mentally Ill (SMI). In comparison, the mental health caseload for the total IDOC adult population was 44% in June 2022, with 14% of individuals in custody designated as SMI. Generally, women in IDOC with higher mental health needs will be incarcerated at Logan or the new [Joliet Inpatient Treatment Center](#), which replaced Elgin in 2022.

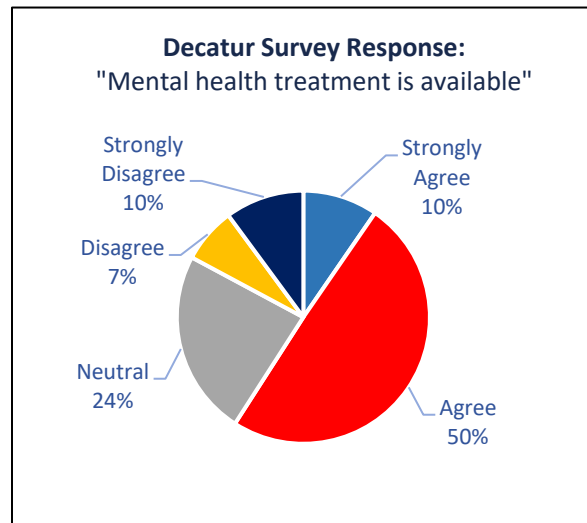
Some women commented on their survey responses that the highly restrictive nature of facility quarantines had a deleterious effect on mental health. For example, one wrote that the women at Decatur *“are not allowed to get video visits or reg visits because of COVID, which effects mental health.”* Another woman wrote that *“all the quarantine and lockdowns has taken a major toll on mental health.”*

The majority of [JHA 2022 Decatur survey respondents](#), 60%, indicated that mental health treatment is available. 17% disagreed. In JHA’s pre-COVID [2020 Decatur survey results](#), 58% agreed and 16% disagreed. Some women at Decatur reported to JHA that the mental health services and substance use disorder treatment program were very helpful. Five women indicated on their survey responses that the mental health care was one of the most positive parts of their experience being incarcerated at Decatur. According to one respondent, *“The mental health here at Decatur is great.”* In contrast, only one woman indicated that the mental health care was one of the most negative parts of her experience. Additionally, we received one report during our visit of staff responding poorly to mental health concerns; reportedly a security staff member told a woman asking for crisis support, *“if it’s that serious, just kill yourself.”*

Mental health programs are only helpful for those who can access them. Despite receiving several comments praising mental health services at Decatur, we received other reports stating that mental health programs and rehabilitative opportunities were severely limited. For example, one woman wrote that there is a *“lack of rehabilitative incentives/programs for those with mental health issues,”* while another individual wrote that *“[t]here are no mental health programs. The*

*rehabilitative process here is nonexistent.*” Mental health program availability has also been affected by lockdowns and reported staff shortages.

As with healthcare generally, IDOC has been involved in litigation for more than a decade regarding the provision of mental health care in [Rasho](#), a class action case initially filed in 2007. As of 2022, a court-appointed monitor continued to find ongoing issues with mental health care in IDOC.



## Substance Use Disorder Treatment

Since JHA’s visit in June 2021, Decatur has partnered with outside vendor [WestCare](#) to provide a dual diagnosis (mental health and substance use disorder) treatment program. JHA was pleased to see that additional treatment was available. Participants are prioritized by outdate so that women scheduled to be released soon can take advantage of the program. Program participants also can receive programming sentence credit if statutorily eligible. All women who were admitted to the WestCare program were housed in the B-Wing, along with women who were waitlisted for the program.

One woman noted on her survey response that *“they need more staffing for WestCare. It’s a great program and the counselors go above and beyond for us in the program.”* Another person, whom we spoke to in person, stated that she found the program generally unhelpful because it was *“a lot of packet work.”* This reported packet work may be the result of COVID restrictions on movement. In draft review, IDOC administrators stated that WestCare has scheduled groups “4 hours a day, 5 days a week. If the WestCare unit is on Medical Quarantine, this disrupts the class time and individuals will receive packets, to keep up on work they would normally complete in group.”

Aside from WestCare, administrative staff stated that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) volunteer-led groups were also again available. During the visit, JHA heard reports of AA and NA groups frequently being cancelled.

The WestCare program is in high demand at Decatur, and administrative staff reported that there were **90 people**, or about a fourth of the population, on the program's waitlist. Unfortunately, the program only allows for **26 people** to be enrolled at a time. The limited capacity for WestCare was a major complaint among the women we spoke to about the program, as well as the system for prioritizing participants. One individual stated that they had a friend who was incarcerated for seven years, but never received any substance use disorder treatment due to lack of availability. Another woman voiced that she had been on the waitlist for five months. Someone we spoke to also suggested that this method of prioritization interfered with the program's efficacy; the full program is a year-long, but the people chosen to participate are often incarcerated for a fraction of that time. JHA was not provided requested information on how many WestCare participants complete the program. Overall, getting "bumped" to the back of waitlists repeatedly as more people enter the prison with sooner outdates was a major frustration. **Limited availability of substance use disorder treatment programs has been a consistent issue for Decatur and throughout IDOC.**

Several women who were on the waitlist for WestCare said that they were unable to participate in other programs. They report that, despite not receiving WestCare services, living in the B-Wing counts as being in the program for other purposes. They therefore are restricted from signing up for other programs due to the limitation on contracts. One woman expressed frustration that she could not sign up for the AA program because of this, and two women stated that they would get another job if this situation was changed. JHA staff brought this issue to the attention of Decatur administrative staff at our visit debriefing meeting. They stated that it was not true that being on the waitlist for WestCare restricted the ability to join other programs, and we suggested that this miscommunication be addressed. **JHA strongly encourages clear communication between**

---

*"There are no programs that can even help anyone here to start rehabilitation. They'll make a group and then it'll get cancelled or only allow an inmate whom getting ready leave the option to participate."*  
— Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

staff and individuals in custody on programming opportunities, especially those that may have an impact on sentencing credits.

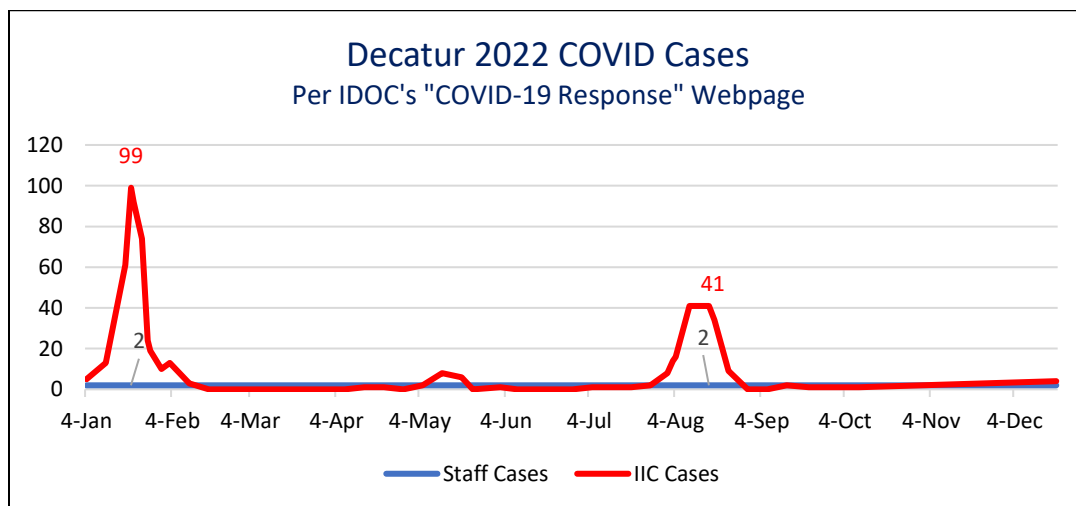
## COVID-19 Impact and Response

*“I understand I’m in prison and a Inmate,  
but I do not wish to die or get a Infection that can harm myself.”*

– Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

Decatur continued to be affected by COVID-19, and procedures implemented to prevent the spread of the virus have had a significant impact on the daily lives of people in custody at Decatur. The prison had a large COVID outbreak in August 2022, where 41 people in custody were reported to have contracted COVID. As noted above, many women completed their JHA surveys during the facility-wide quarantine in August, so many of the responses we received centered on Decatur’s quarantine procedures. Decatur also had a prior large outbreak in January 2022, with 99 people in custody contracting the virus. More COVID cases and lockdowns continued to be reported into 2023.

As of December 9, 2022, 307 people in custody at Decatur were reported to have contracted COVID since the beginning of the pandemic. One women at Decatur died after contracting COVID in [January 2021](#). During our visit to Decatur on October 4, no one in custody was reported to have COVID.



## Vaccinations and Masking

During JHA's visit, JHA was informed that vaccination requirements have caused some hiring and retention issues among IDOC facilities, and Decatur had three staff members resign due to the requirement. IDOC administrators provided JHA with data reporting that as of October 14, 2022, 205 out of 223 Decatur staff members (92%) were fully vaccinated against COVID-19. No staff members had received just one COVID-19 vaccine shot, and 18 staff members were classified as "not eligible" for the COVID-19 vaccine. 78 staff members (35%) had received a booster shot. This staff vaccination rate was better than the IDOC average of 79%. **In January 2023, IDOC suspended the COVID vaccination mandates for existing staff, visitors, volunteers, and contractors.**

As of October 14, 2022, 44% of people incarcerated at Decatur were reported to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. 20% had received their first booster vaccine, and none had received a second booster vaccine. Decatur's vaccination rate was much worse than the IDOC average of 69%. Administrative staff stated that they give people in custody the option of being vaccinated on an ongoing basis, and staff and peers work to educate people in custody about the COVID vaccine. However, one woman during the visit said that she has submitted several request slips over the past two months asking to be vaccinated, but had not received a response. When asked if there was a more formal procedure for obtaining the vaccine, this woman said that she was not aware of one. JHA has been continually pushing IDOC to make vaccines and updated boosters more available throughout the system because of such ongoing reports and low booster rates. In draft review, IDOC stated "We do have to have 6 individuals in order to administer the vaccine, as 1 vial vaccinates 6 individuals and is no longer usable after opening."

Staff non-compliance with protocols to reduce the spread of COVID continued to be a common concern among the women at Decatur. Several women reported staff did not properly wear face masks and came into the prison with symptoms of COVID. One woman expressed anger that she contracted COVID despite consistently wearing a mask, while *"over half the staff does not wear theirs all the time or the right way."* JHA also observed during our visit that some Decatur staff failed to wear their masks properly, or at all. Women in custody also stated that they were only given one mask a week during the outbreak in August. In March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators stated, "All staff and individuals in custody are required to wear a mask. As

incidents of non-compliance are found, staff/individuals are addressed. Individuals can request a replacement mask at any time from staff.”

## Facility Quarantine Procedures

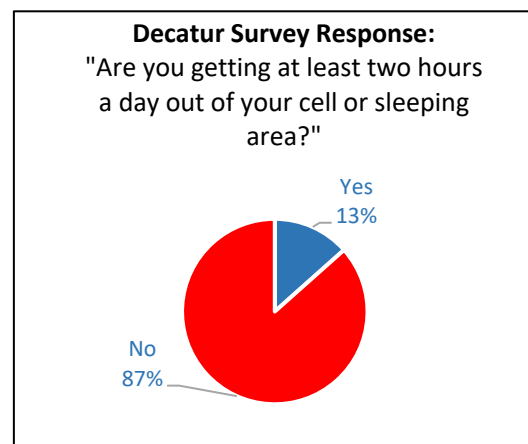
Many women expressed frustration with quarantine procedures at Decatur through their survey responses, letters, and conversations with JHA. The women in custody generally believed that quarantine restrictions were too burdensome on movement, programming, and communication with loved ones. However, despite these harsh restrictions, the women also expressed that they believed the restrictions were ineffective in containing the spread of COVID.

Out of the 204 survey responses we received in 2022, just 25 people indicated that they were getting at least two hours a day out of their cell at this minimum-security prison. This is likely due in part to surveys being completed during facility-wide quarantine periods. In response to reports of severely limited out-of-cell time, IDOC administrators stated in March 2023 draft review that there is typically a two-hour rotating dayroom schedule from approximately 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., which should afford four opportunities of two hours out-of-cell daily. In contrast, women reported only being allowed 20 minutes a day out of their cells to shower and use the phone during quarantines, which was also commonly reported earlier in the pandemic.

Restrictions on people custody that are harsher than necessary not only affect their well-being but may also be counterproductive; one woman stated that the fear of ongoing medical quarantine encouraged some people in custody to not be truthful about experiencing COVID symptoms.

COVID continued to have significant impact on the provision of services and programming at

Decatur, especially during quarantine periods. Decatur staff stated that during quarantine, only educational programs continued to run, and they only consisted of packet work distributed to program participants. Women at Decatur were very distressed at the halt in programs. Women also were frustrated at the effect that the COVID quarantine had on their ability to earn sentencing credits. Only small number of women, such as those with road crew job assignments, were able to continue working during quarantine. One woman wrote, “[I] don’t



*think the 'lockdown' should only apply to those with jobs/school on the premises”* and that quarantine procedures *“should apply to everyone or no one.”* Another voiced that contract days should be allotted despite the quarantine restrictions, because *“it’s not our fault we can’t work.”*

We also continued to hear from a few women that the prison was not adequately sanitized during COVID outbreaks. One woman wrote that when she tested positive for COVID, she was moved to a cell that had not been cleaned before her arrival. She says that she asked for cleaning supplies so that she could clean it herself but was not allowed access to such supplies. A document reflecting the facility’s reported COVID protocols states that a room that has been inhabited by someone COVID positive should be “cleaned with the hydrogen peroxide mixture” after its occupant vacates the room.

The lack of visitation during the facility-wide quarantines was a major source of anxiety. Women wrote that they were not permitted video visits or in-person visits during quarantine, and this lack of contact with loved ones had a deleterious effect on their mental health. This lack of visitation is compounded by the reportedly inconsistent mail services at Decatur. **Every effort should be made to ensure that people in custody can remain in contact with the outside world while in quarantine.** Maintaining contact with loved ones is crucial to the well-being incarcerated people in general, but especially so during stressful events such as a COVID outbreak.

---

*“We are currently 7 days without outside mail. I’m able to use the phone 1x a day. No visits. No contract days because of COVID quarantine. I thought I took time to better myself. Instead I’m just sitting here without support from the outside or inside.”*

– Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

Issues with receiving information about quarantine procedures also continued to be commonly reported. Several people expressed that they were given little information about when quarantine would end and programming and visits could resume. Unfortunately, lengths of quarantines may be unknowable and extended if people continue to test positive. One woman

wrote, “No wardens, administration, or counselors have been around to give us an update. I’ve had my family calling for over a week and the only response that’s being given is to not call up here anymore.” Another woman wrote that her mother was terminally ill during the facility-wide quarantine, and she had been unable to contact her family for updates despite informing staff about the situation. In contrast, one woman told JHA that Decatur staff gave her emergency video visits when her mother was terminally ill.

Not knowing when they can resume normal communications can be extremely stressful to incarcerated people and their loved ones. As we stated in our initial public [April 2020 recommendations](#) for IDOC COVID-19 procedures, maintaining outside contacts is essential and **JHA believes that transparent communication with people in custody about changes to normal daily activities is crucial for maintaining the physical and mental health of incarcerated people.**

Our conversations with the women at Decatur and their responses to our survey indicate several ongoing issues with the procedures for facility quarantines. The women were understandably frustrated, finding Decatur’s

practices to be both ineffective and too restrictive. **IDOC and Decatur should consider revising their current protocols for COVID outbreaks. Ideally, such procedures would be designed to avoid high-risk situations while permitting lower-risk activities, such as yard time, phone use, and video visits.** People in custody should also be regularly able to obtain the COVID vaccine and updated boosters, and sanitization procedures should continue be followed closely.

On November 29, 2022, the CDC released updated guidance for the management of COVID in prisons. The CDC emphasizes the importance of visitation and programming for people in prison, even during COVID outbreaks. Per the guidance document, “[v]isitation and programming are essential for residents’ mental health and well-being,” therefore programming and visitation should be made available when feasible. JHA hopes that IDOC prisons will follow this guidance in future facility quarantines.



# Pregnancy & The Moms & Babies Program

In fiscal year 2022, three women at Decatur gave birth per [IDOC data](#). Decatur offers a “Moms & Babies” program which is, as stated by the [Illinois Administrative Code](#), “designed to provide healthy pregnant and post-natal offenders the opportunity to develop and nurture a bond with their infants through programming and a safe supportive living environment.” Women in the Moms & Babies housing unit are able to live with their child until the age of two, and they are offered support by the Illinois Department of Health during labor and post-partum. Per information provided by Decatur staff, there are also seven peer doulas who are available upon request.

The eligibility requirements for the Moms & Babies program was a source of frustration for one woman who stated that those with Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) involvement often do not qualify. DCFS involvement is [one of many factors](#) considered before placing someone in the Moms & Babies program, including the person’s sentence, convictions, grade, gang affiliation, psychological evaluation results, and medical and dental history.

*“I came to prison pregnant and was unable to keep my son with me after he was born and it was the most heart breaking experience of my entire life. Please open up the moms + babies program so other moms never have to feel the way I did.” —Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022*

The Moms & Babies program was suspended in spring 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the women in the program were released via medical furloughs and electronic monitoring. During March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators reported that the program was fully reinstated in December 2022. However, the housing unit was in use for pregnant individuals in custody as of JHA’s October 2022 visit. Administrative staff also explained at the time of JHA’s visit that the housing area has become more of a pregnancy unit than a new mothers’ unit, since many pregnant women are eligible to leave prison before childbirth or would not be in prison long enough after birth for their child to join them. Additionally, Decatur offers

family reunification services for some other women housed on the unit, which are intended to foster familial bonds by facilitating visits between mother and child.

JHA visited the Moms & Babies housing unit, which was sparsely populated at the time, and spoke to a few women housed there. We also spoke to several people in general housing who were previously pregnant while incarcerated at Decatur. A complaint that we heard from people who have been pregnant at Decatur was that pregnant women were not permitted to participate in programming while pregnant and post-partum. One pregnant woman told us that women are restricted from programming during pregnancy and for 6-8 weeks after birth, depending on their health, which was *“boring.”* Another woman wrote in a survey response, *“I’m currently pregnant.*

*“They do not do anything extra to relieve the stress of the pregnant offenders.”* — Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

*Not permitted to come out of rooms while on quarantine lockdown which we are currently on.”* Due to the small population in the Moms & Babies wing, and what appeared to be stricter quarantine protocols, one can imagine that its occupants would feel particularly isolated during quarantines.

According to Decatur staff, women who have recently given birth are provided a breast pump and offered classes on breastfeeding. There is also a private room in the visitation area for women to breastfeed their children during visits.

However, some women reported difficulties related to breastfeeding. One new mother said that she was *“kicked off”* of the Moms & Babies unit and thus forced to pump in the healthcare bathroom. Another woman who had recently given birth wrote that she had to pump in the infirmary, which she believed was unsanitary, because she was not eligible for the Moms & Program. She also reported that staff responded to her grievance about this issue by saying *“When there is nowhere for you to pump, that’s where you’ll pump.”*

As mentioned in the [section on visitation](#), we were told people were not permitted to breastfeed during in-person visits, despite there being a designated room to do so. One woman wrote about this situation and stated that her *“pump has been worthless for weeks.”* Further, she reported staff were not freezing her milk in a timely manner, and her grievances about these issues had been ignored, reflecting what she perceived to be a general lack of staff caring. A

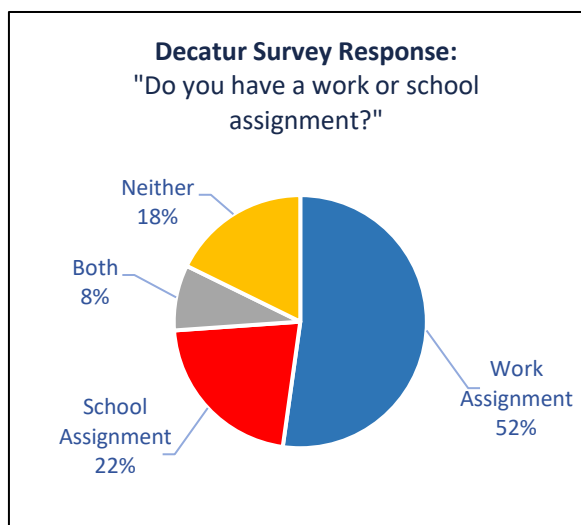
general lack of care for new mothers was also reported by a woman who informed JHA that staff asked a woman to “squat and cough” after coming back to Decatur post-childbirth, which caused her to bleed onto the floor.

## Productive Activity

### General Comments

Though programming was severely limited during the height of the COVID pandemic, programs were reportedly back to pre-pandemic operations at the time of the October 2022 visit.

Administrative staff stated that every woman at Decatur is entitled to at least one programming or work contract a year, and there are currently enough opportunities that some women have two contracts at once. The percentage of women who reported they had assignments in JHA surveys was notably higher than what we usually observe at other IDOC prisons.



*“If your outdate is later than others you can spend a lot of time doing nothing, leading to depression and a sense of unworthiness.”*

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

During our conversations with the women at Decatur, some expressed confusion regarding the logistics of programming and contracts, especially as they pertain to earning program sentencing credits. For example, one woman who worked consistently for three months did not receive any sentencing credits because she was reassigned to a new position during that period. She felt disappointed and “*misled*” by this result. Another person we spoke with said that she thought that she would receive one day of sentence credit for every two days she worked; however, she had received no sentence credits, and had not received an explanation as to why. Typically program sentence credits are awarded at the end of a contract

goal period. If unmet, one can now receive a partial sentence credit award depending on the circumstances.

A general lack of programming opportunities was also frequently reported. As discussed in this report's section on COVID-19, programming largely came to a halt at the onset of the pandemic, and many programs continue to be unavailable during facility quarantine procedures. According to staff, only educational programs continued to operate during these quarantines, and education was limited to packet work. Some women reported during the quarantine that *"educational opportunities have stopped,"* implying that educational programming had completely halted.

Of the 204 surveys JHA received from Decatur in 2022, we received dozens of written responses—about one out of every four replies—indicating that the prison needed more programming opportunities. In particular, many women asserted that programming for women with longer times until release was essentially nonexistent. As noted in this report's section on substance use disorder treatment, the correlation between outdates and ability to participate in programming causes frustration and may also be counterproductive. Because people who are to be released from prison soon are given priority, those who have years left to serve are often left with few programming opportunities. For example, one woman notes that the prison has *"no programs for people with 4 or more years to do."* Another woman echoed this in a survey response, stating *"they barely have anything offered for people's MSR dates are 2028-2029. They say those people aren't priorities."* As noted in the section of this report on favoritism and discrimination, some women asserted that favorites of staff members get more and more desirable programming opportunities. A few women also stated that women of color are given priority in programming due to "racial balancing" policies.

In addition to providing opportunities to earn sentencing credits, programs, and work assignments provide opportunities to socialize, develop skills, and generally improve mental health. Finding methods to increase their availability should be a priority. **JHA continues to recommend that IDOC make more programs and work assignments available, especially for those serving longer sentences.**

## Work Assignments

73% of the Decatur survey respondents reported having a work assignment. Experiences with work assignments reported varied greatly depending on the assignment. The most common thing we heard regarding work assignments at Decatur was that women were frustrated about being unable to earn sentencing credits from their assignments during quarantines. Contracts for work assignments generally last 60-90 days, except for desirable road crew contracts, which were reported to be indefinite. People with outside grounds clearance are eligible for road crew contracts, which were reportedly active during quarantines and can pay well compared to other prison assignments - per the Decatur Orientation Manual provided, \$0.95-\$2.15 a day, or \$20-\$45 a month. Because the assignment is in such high demand, one woman suggested that this makes people wary to voice concerns related to the assignment, stating that there is *“no system in place to ensure the road crew members are treated fairly,”* and that she was afraid to grieve issues because she may *“face blow back of being reassigned.”*

---

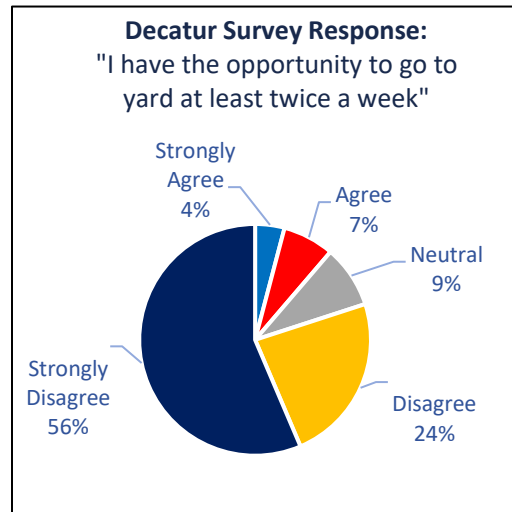
During March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators stated regarding Decatur program availability: “Clinical services at Decatur Correctional Center provides orientation to all Individuals in Custody entering the facility upon transfer making sure all Individuals in Custody are provided a manual and the rules they are required to follow. The Individuals in Custody are given the opportunity to meet several department heads and ask questions making it a smooth transition from Logan Correctional Center. They provide Individuals in Custody the opportunity to meet with their housing unit counselors one on one as needed by hosting office hours on each unit weekly. There are two (2) Corrections Assessment Specialists that provide assessment evaluations that will help aid in determining placement for certain programming based on their individual needs. These specialists oversee programing that reinforce personal responsibility for behavior and helps identify their strengths creating a positive foundation for the Individual in Custody to build on. They also focus on the individual needs of those Individuals in Custody that are affected by substance use and/or abuse.”

JHA did hear several concerns that work assignments did not consider women's physical limitations. We spoke with a few women who said that they were older and had chronic pain, yet were assigned physically demanding jobs. For example, one woman wrote on her survey that prison staff will *"assign you jobs and even if you have medical conditions require you to do that job rather than assign you a light duty job."* She notes that she is older with multiple surgeries and chronic pain conditions, but that she had a job that required her to be standing for hours. Another woman told us that she was on a heavy sleep medication to help with pain associated with cancer, which makes it very difficult to wake up for her early work shifts. However, she was not permitted to switch work shifts. She eventually quit her work assignment and was put on B-grade disciplinary privilege restrictions for quitting. This woman found this particularly unfair because she knew several "favorites" without medical issues who were permitted to switch shifts. Another woman told JHA staff that she had a serious medical condition and was only offered a job in dietary, which was physically demanding and exacerbated her symptoms. She said she told two staff members about her ongoing pain, but received no help with accommodations.

**JHA has advised IDOC that there are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) concerns regarding lack of accommodations in work assignments.** While people can be given some "light duty" work or be "medically unassigned," given the current scarcity of healthcare staff combined with other issues, including the increasingly aging and medically infirmed population, this is likely an inadequate solution. Further, we continue to have general concerns regarding worker safety and fair labor practices for people who are incarcerated in IDOC. In response to reports of physical limitations not being considered in work assignments, IDOC administrators stated in March 2023 draft review, that healthcare "issues light duty orders as needed, and placement assigns jobs according to the light duty order. If an individual is unable to complete work assignments due to a physical limitation and does not have a light duty order, staff are good to report this to placement and Shift Supervisors."

## Outdoor Time & Recreation

JHA visited Decatur’s gym, which had plenty of workout equipment that appeared to be largely functional. The gym was mostly empty at the time, with two women tossing a football and a small group of women watching TV in a corner. Administrative staff stated that women go to the gym with their units and can access the gym every day. This was contradicted by individuals in custody, who report that they often do not have gym or yard due to reported lack of staff. Someone we spoke to said that they had not had yard time in several days. Other



women reported via survey responses that they *“never”* have gym or yard *“because of ‘no staff’”* and *“there’s never officers to take us to yard or gym.”* One woman said that gym time is one of the best parts of her experience at Decatur *“if we have a CO/staff member that wants to take us.”* As noted in the Executive Summary above, in response to these concerns in draft review, IDOC administrators stated that “Yard is only canceled if there are staff shortages, Medical Quarantine, Weather, and if we were to be on a lockdown. During the time frame Medical Quarantine and Weather were the two biggest reasons for closing of yard.”

Another woman noted that she preferred being at Logan because they got to go outside during the winter, while the yard at Decatur closed on October 15. While IDOC prisons do limit yard time due to cold temperatures, JHA is not aware of any policy requiring yards to cease by a particular date. Unlike most facilities, Decatur does have outdoor patio areas that are accessible from the housing units. It is therefore possible that women are getting some time outside on the patios as JHA observed during our June 2021 visit, without getting access to the prison yard, but this was unclear. During draft review, IDOC administrators confirmed that the yard closed for winter hours, typically around October 15, but noted that if the weather is good the patios connected to the housing units are open for use.

## Education

Most women incarcerated at Decatur who have over two years to serve are administered the Test of Adult Basic Education to determine eligibility for academic and vocational programming,

in accordance with [IDOC policy](#). Those who score below a certain threshold are mandated to take Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes, while the other courses, Advanced ABE and Adult Secondary Education (ASE), are optional. Thousands of people are regularly waitlisted to take mandatory ABE programs within IDOC. Day-for-day sentencing credits are available for those who are statutorily eligible and complete an educational program, and GED testing is offered onsite for those participating in the ASE course.

August 2022 Educational Participation		
	<u>Participants</u>	<u>Completers</u>
ABE	47	2
Advanced ABE	43	3
ASE	9	1

In August 2022, [public IDOC data](#) shows there were 99 educational program participants at Decatur and 16 women in vocational programs. Notably Decatur still lacks any non-vocational college programming, which JHA has previously reported on as a detriment. During March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators noted that individuals in custody were able to participate in [Blackstone Career Institute](#) courses for paralegal certification, in addition to the Horticulture, Culinary Arts, Career Technology, and Manufacturing vocational college-credit courses, further discussed in that section below.

22% of JHA's 2022 Decatur survey respondents indicated that they were involved in an educational program. Several women indicated that they felt supported and respected by teachers in their program, stating that they were *"nice, very supportive," "sweet,"* and *"helpful and kind."* Six women reported that the opportunity to receive an education was one of the most positive parts of their experience at Decatur, with one woman specifically saying that the *"academic teachers"* were the best part of her experience.

As with other programs, the predominant complaint about educational programs was the system of prioritizing admission based on outdates. Per information provided by administrative staff, those sentenced to two or more years are eligible for educational programming. Some women may have too little time to participate. Eligible potential participants are then prioritized by outdates, with those being released soon taking first priority. One woman wrote to us about this



frustration, saying “*there have been several times that I was next in line for class and then a shipment came in I was bumped down in the list. I have grieved the issue several times.*”

---

*“Trying to place people in work and/or education based off their outdate is ridiculous. If you get 10 years you should be able to place yourself in classes from GED & up. Education should not be the last thing it should the first option.”*

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

As mentioned above, some women reported that education opportunities ceased during quarantines. JHA also heard from one woman who was uncertain if she would finish her educational program because the teacher was often absent. **JHA again recommends that IDOC ensure coverage for teacher absences so that the education of people in custody is not regularly disrupted.**

Reports of scarce education opportunities were also common in JHA’s [last visit](#) to Decatur, and are often reported in other IDOC prisons. The 2022 Illinois Higher Education in Prison Task Force, which included a JHA representative, issued a [report](#) that outlines issues and presents data regarding educational achievements and deficits in IDOC. This report includes data on low average TABE scores, as well as low educational program participation and completion at Decatur and elsewhere. **JHA hopes Illinois will build on this work to provide greater educational opportunities and build greater accessibility to higher education for people in prison.**

## Vocational Programs

Decatur had partnered with Lake Land College to provide [Warehousing & Distribution and Manufacturing Skills programs](#) in September 2022. A document provided by administrative staff states that Warehousing & Distribution program will “[p]rovide students with entry level skills to gain employment in the field of warehousing and distribution. Students will learn the basics of working in a warehouse environment, the workforce and technical skills required as well as the process of materials handling. Emphasis will be placed on forklift operations and employability skills.” It also states the Manufacturing Skills program “prepares graduates for entry level

manufacturing positions. Emphasis is placed upon measurement, hydraulics, pneumatics, electric motors, and mechanical and electrical drives. Basic skills in blueprint reading and mathematics are also included in this program.” The Manufacturing Skills program is 60 days long with six hours of classwork a day, and individuals in custody need a TABE score of 8.0 or higher and a GED or high school diploma to enroll. The Warehousing & Distribution program was not yet operating at the time of JHA’s visit, as the prison was still searching for a teacher to run the course. As of March 2023 draft review, the program was still in need of a teacher.

JHA visitors were able to see demonstrations of the different skills that the women in the Manufacturing program were learning, which involved hands-on training with replicas of factory floor machines and educational tutorials on laptops. The program’s teacher appeared enthusiastic and invested in the program, and was optimistic about the advantages the program will provide participants upon reentry. We also spoke to a participant, who was generally pleased with the program. The major downfall of this program is its low capacity. The Manufacturing Skills program was in a pilot stage at the time of JHA’s visit and only had four participants and one teacher. When asked what the capacity would be post-pilot, the teacher indicated that the program would always be low capacity, most likely eight students, because it is “computer limited.”

Decatur continues to have a horticulture program, which, according to information provided by administrators, “is designed for participants to receive entry level training that prepares them to confidently enter the growing Horticulture industry.” As of August 2022, seven women were participating in this program. JHA did not speak to anyone involved in this program about it during the visit, but we did observe some women planting flowers in the prison’s courtyard area. The program continues to run during the colder months, but via in-class instruction vs. hands-on horticulture work. The only comment we received regarding the horticulture program was from a survey respondent who was disappointed that none of the flowers or plants from the program were planted in areas used for recreational purposes. She believes that *“an opportunity is being lost here”* because *“the area we can go outside is very sterile—no flowers or beauty just grass and cement walls.”*

Decatur also has a Culinary Arts program, which had 10 participants as of August 2022. Decatur’s dog grooming program is no longer available, which is unfortunate because women said that they really enjoyed the program during our prior visits.

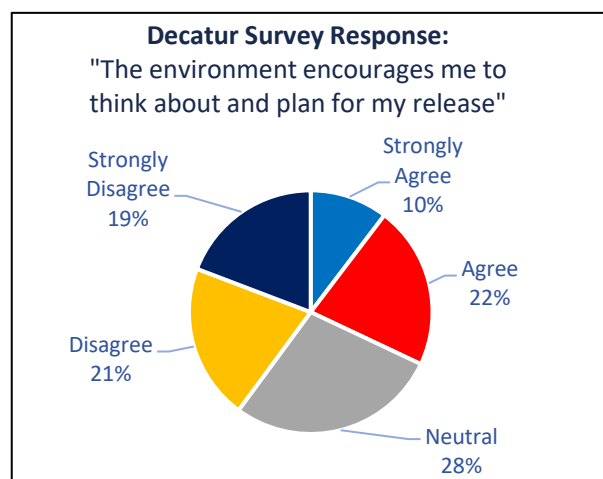
## Religious Services

Decatur did not have a chaplain employed, and had not since April 2020. During March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators stated that the chaplain vacancy was posted from November 18, 2022 – December 02, 2022 but interviews for the position had not been scheduled yet. IDOC administrators also mentioned that the IDOC Chief Chaplain and Logan chaplain may provide some coverage to compensate for the chaplain vacancy.

Administrative staff stated at the time of JHA’s visit that they have two volunteers that they rely on to provide church services on Sundays and Bible Study once a week, and sometimes have Jehovah’s Witnesses visit the prison. However, nine women specifically indicated in their open-ended survey responses that there were no church services being offered, and two women specified that Bible study groups were not being offered either. It is unclear whether the lack of religious services was due to COVID-related restrictions on movement or volunteer unavailability. A document provided by administrative staff titled “Overview 2022” states that “At this time the Decatur Correctional Center is without a Chaplain, so these [religious] services have been suspended at this time.” IDOC chaplains also typically serve as prisons’ volunteer coordinators.

## Reentry Preparation

During the JHA visit, staff pointed out the “Out in a Week Boutique” at Decatur which gives individuals in custody the opportunity to choose street clothes to wear when they are released or professional clothing to wear to job interviews post-release. The clothing is provided by local donations. Alternatively, per information provided to JHA, “If for some reason they cannot find anything in the “Out in a Week Boutique”, they can either buy sweats from commissary, if funds are available, or their family can send an outfit in no more than two (2) weeks prior to them being released.”



Several people commented on their surveys that there was a lack of programs and services focused on reentry preparation. For example, one woman said that there is *“no communication for release plans or any information,”* and another woman stated that she was *“not getting things in order to leave like caseplans, groups, and no where to go where I’m from.”* One woman wrote on her survey, *“Prison needs a program set in place for a person to be productive once released instead of throwing them out there to the wolves with nothing.”* It is also unclear how uniform reentry planning and services are throughout IDOC; JHA will be focusing on this issue in a forthcoming report.

---

During March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators stated regarding reentry services at Decatur: “The department has focused on Re-Entry this year and streamlined the process in getting Individuals in Custody their certified birth certificate and social security card enabling them to get an official state-issued identification card upon release. They have also worked with Individuals in Custody through the application process of getting Medicaid approved prior to release so they are able to meet their medical and mental health needs with no lapse in coverage when they are released into the community. They also held a in person Re-Entry Summit that allowed vendors to explain their services and the opportunity to give pamphlets to the offenders that were leaving within the following nine (9) months. Clinical services staff worked hard to screen all Individuals in Custody for EDSC, Electronic Detention and Work Release to ensure that all Individuals in Custody have the best opportunity. Field Services continues to work with the PRG [Parole Reentry Group] to ensure all homeless Individuals in Custody have a place to reside upon release. We also have Family Services Counselors who are available for family issues (DCFS, Divorce, etc.). Family Service also facilitates programs such as Moving On, SIMP, AA Meetings, Life Smart, and Money Smart.”

## Library

JHA visited the prison law library and noted that it had an electronic legal kiosk and seemed to be well-stocked with legal books and well-organized. One woman we spoke with praised the library, saying that it is “*real good, A+.*” She said that individuals in custody can go to the library for an hour a day Monday through Friday, and they can check out two books at a time. The only negative thing we heard about the law library was that it, like most other services and programs, was unavailable during quarantines and “*always closes early*” otherwise. Staff said that the library was open “every day there is a librarian and a legal clerk on-site.” Hours were not specified.

During March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators stated that there was currently one incarcerated worker legal clerk at Decatur, and they did not believe there was a need for more clerks. One woman told us she had signed up for a law clerk class and was told by a staff member that she should purchase study materials, but soon after using her savings to do so, she was informed that the class would not be starting because people needed the library to work on their legal cases. Law clerk training is not only valuable for people while they are in custody, giving them tools to advocate for themselves and others, but it is also a desirable and employable skill set upon release. **JHA hopes space and resources will be devoted to maintaining and expanding this program.**

## Other Programs and Services

Administrative staff stated that Decatur has recently reinitiated a “Hot Topics” program post-COVID. This program invites a volunteer to come to the facility once a month to give a presentation on a topic that many women may find helpful, such as breast cancer awareness, obtaining a driver’s license, or signing up for Medicaid. Administrative staff also spoke to us about [Shakespeare Corrected](#), a program run by Millikin University. Per information provided by administrative staff, “Shakespeare Corrected’s mission is to bring undergraduate students from Millikin University together with incarcerated and disadvantaged populations to collaborate and create a theatrical experience intended to inspire transformation and redemption in students, participants, and their families. Approximately 47 Individuals in Custody participate in this program. The nine-month program culminates in a series of performances of a full-scale Shakespeare play for audiences of friends, family, and other inmates.”

# Physical Plant Conditions

## In General

Many IDOC facilities are in urgent need of repairs to plumbing, roofs, ventilation systems, etc. Several women we spoke to at Decatur commented on issues such as cracks around windows, leaking ceilings, and poor plumbing and ventilation. One woman showed a bathroom to a JHA visitor, which had loose and missing caulk between the floor and walls, cracks in the walls, and cracks in the windows that the women reportedly routinely filled with toilet paper. Another person wrote on her survey that *“preventative maintenance is a joke—Tiles are missing on the floor in places. The water taste funny like moldy. The plumbing backs up often.”* This is also brought up by a woman who wrote, *“It takes 1-1.5 months for maintenance. Currently, the shower on the housing unit floods. They’ve tried to fix it, but it still floods.”* Flooding in the showers was an issue during JHA’s [last visit](#) to the prison as well. Decatur staff indicated in their “5 Year Capital Development Plan” that they do plan to remodel all the showers within the housing units.

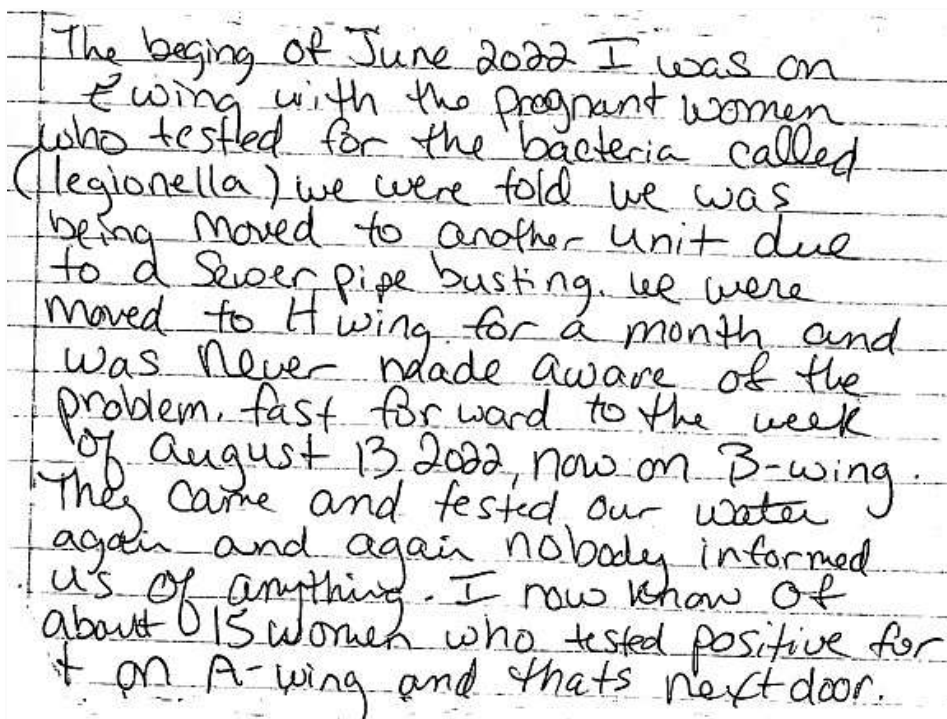
However, some women also indicated that Decatur was *“sturdy”* compared to Logan, and was *“fairly clean.”* In response to our survey question asking what the most positive part of their experience at Decatur has been, six women wrote that the relative cleanliness of the facility was the best part. The most common concerns we heard about the physical prison conditions related to poor or dangerous drinking water, poor ventilation, mold, and lack of pest control.

**JHA continues to recommend that Illinois seriously consider the implications of the contracted Master Plan report (anticipated in early 2023) reviewing IDOC’s physical plant systems, and invest more wisely to ensure health and safety, including proactive and preventative maintenance.**

## Water Quality

The quality of drinking water has caused anxiety among people incarcerated in IDOC prisons for years. People in custody have regularly reported discoloration, strange tastes and odors, substances floating in the water, and health issues that clear up after ceasing to drink the water. This anxiety has been exacerbated by [detections of Legionella bacteria](#) in various IDOC facilities, including Decatur.

When asked about the reports we heard from the women regarding Legionella during the visit, administrative staff then stated that Legionella was detected in March and August 2022. Unit E, which housed the Moms & Babies program, tested positive in March. While administrative staff agreed that the bacteria was found in the sink of an individual's room, they disagreed among themselves as to whether that room was occupied at the time. In August, Legionella was found in a sink inside a staff-only area of Unit A. In both cases, the entire prison's water system was flushed, and the affected housing unit was flushed twice per day for a period of weeks. JHA received a letter from someone at Decatur who said there was an additional Legionella detection in June of 2022. In draft review, IDOC confirmed that there had been multiple detections in 2022 as more regular testing implemented in various locations.



The beging of June 2022 I was on E wing with the pregnant women who tested for the bacteria called (legionella) we were told we was being moved to another unit due to a sewer pipe busting. we were moved to H wing for a month and was never made aware of the problem. fast for ward to the week of August 13 2022, now on B-wing. They came and tested our water again and again nobody informed us of anything. I now know of about 15 women who tested positive for it on A-wing and thats next door.

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

The lack of transparency surrounding the water quality at Decatur was of particular concern to the women incarcerated there. JHA staff spoke to multiple women who were housed in an affected unit, and they all reported that they were not accurately informed as to why they were moved out of that unit. Further, all the women we spoke to said that they first learned about the issue via a correctional officer or another person in custody. As noted in the Executive Summary, during March 2023 draft review, IDOC administrators stated, “Memos are issued to

staff and individuals in custody, advising all of legionella issues. Verbal notifications are also made.”

Though the water was at the time of the visit deemed to be free of Legionella, some anxieties about the water supply lingered due to its reported strange taste and smell. A few women reported that a correctional officer told them that the water’s bad taste and smell was due to an ongoing issue with the prison’s pipe system. If true, this is a concern. If false, this statement is a demonstration of how misinformation can spread when accurate information is not readily

provided. Some women commented that that the water tastes “*metallic*,” or “*moldy*” and appears to be “*rusty*.”

JHA spoke with a pregnant woman who was worried about the water affecting the health of her child. Though staff has said that each wing has a different water system, and Legionella detections in one wing therefore should not be a concern to her, she was wary to trust that information, asking “Why would they flush the entire facility if the water is fine?” More transparency around water system testing, findings, and flushing would likely alleviate some of the stress women are experiencing.

JHA, along with a coalition of other advocates, has been focused on water safety in IDOC, pushing for increased transparency on testing practices and results, and advocating for the health and safety of people in prison. This coalition called for an assessment of the water systems in every Illinois prison and urged the Executive Branch to repair or replace the water and sanitation systems or shut down prisons that have systems beyond repair or where replacement is not a reasonable undertaking. For more information, see our [November 2022 joint statement](#) and our [July 2022 letter](#) to the Director of the Illinois Capital Development Board.

## Temperature and Ventilation

Many IDOC facilities have issues with extreme heat in the summer. Decatur is one of the few prisons that has air conditioning, and thus we heard no reports of extreme heat from the women at Decatur. In fact, **air conditioning was the most common response to our open-ended survey question asking what the most positive things about Decatur are**; more than a dozen women responded to this question with “air conditioning” or “climate control.” We did hear



from four women who reported cold temperatures over the fall and winter months. One woman stated that the heat had not been turned on as of our visit on October 4, and the housing units became very cold at night. She stressed that the cold is particularly hard on older women. It should be noted that many women at Decatur have shorter sentences and had not yet experienced winter temperatures at the facility when JHA's survey was conducted. During our [February 2020 visit](#) to Decatur, very cold temperatures were frequently reported.

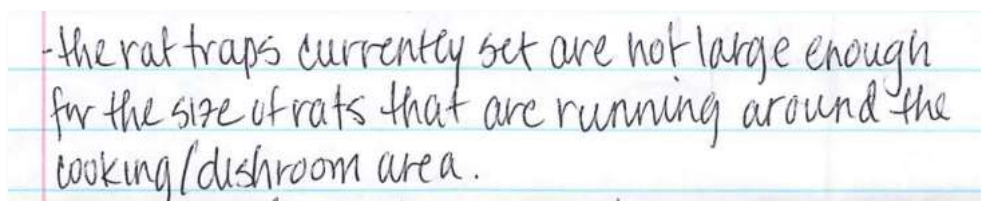
Poor ventilation was reported in our conversations with women and via survey responses. One woman told us that there are *"piles of black stuff"* on the floor under the air vents. Another woman reported that the fan in her unit has black build-up, and she has difficulty breathing at night. In response to our survey question about one thing that could improve the prison, an individual wrote, *"To have the vents cleaned out. Seriously."* Lack of vent cleaning is a commonly reported and observed issue within IDOC prisons and one that seems relatively easy to address. Some women also noted that the lack of openable windows in the housing units made quarantines especially difficult because of the lack of fresh air.

## Mold and Pests

Pervasive mold, especially in the showers, was again reported by women incarcerated at Decatur. This is also commonly reported at most IDOC prisons. Black mold was repeatedly reported, though one woman also reported green mold. Another person said that there were worms in the showers, which has also previously been reported. One woman showed a bathroom with mold to a JHA visitor and noted that the prison used to have incarcerated worker "shower crews" to do deep cleaning, but did not anymore. Mold in other areas, she said, was *"painted over"* rather than removed, which is also an issue that is commonly reported in prisons. One woman wrote that the showers should ideally be *"power washed at least once a week until mold is gone then once a month."* **This seems to be a reasonable suggestion, and JHA has previously repeatedly recommended more power-washing and deep cleaning of prisons.** Mold was also reported in some other areas of housing units. A woman we spoke to said that there was black mold next to her bed. When she filed a grievance about the mold, she said staff laughed at her. She was eventually moved to a different unit, but she said that a cough she attributes to the mold persists, and she sometimes coughs *"black stuff"* out of her lungs. **JHA has also repeatedly advised IDOC to remediate and test mold and publicize results to address such common concerns.**

Multiple women reported issues with bugs and rodents in the prison, especially in the kitchen, as during prior JHA visits. Three women reported that they had seen rat feces in the food from dietary. One woman said that, when she worked in the kitchen, she saw staff use cake mix with bugs in it. During our 2021 visit, administrators stated that pest control visits dietary monthly and mice traps are used continuously.

One woman commented on her survey that the grass in the yard was frequently overgrown, and the women got ticks on them. During the 2022 visit, two women said that they had ongoing issues with ants in their housing unit. One said that when the number of ants in her unit became overwhelming, she asked a lieutenant for help eradicating them and he simply said that there was nothing they could do, and she resorted to caulking her window with toothpaste.



-the rat traps currently set are not large enough for the size of rats that are running around the cooking/dishroom area.

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

## Commissary

While some women reported during the October 2022 JHA visit that they were pleased that they at least were supposed to shop commissary weekly, or more frequently than at other prisons, the lack of items available for purchase at commissary has been a pressing concern at all IDOC prisons, including Decatur. On October 13, 2021, IDOC’s Director issued a [statement](#) explaining that the commissary disruptions were due to “factors beyond the control of the Department or its staff” related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over a year later, the lack of items available at commissary continues to be a major stressor for people in custody. JHA received an updated commissary list for Decatur during draft review in March 2023, and was encouraged to see that more products had been listed since our October 2022 visit.

Though the availability of hygiene products appeared to have improved since JHA’s prior visit in 2021, women expressed frustration with the quality of products available. Hygiene products

such as shampoo, deodorant, and body wash were of particular concern. Women reported that their only options for hygiene products were targeted toward men, or that the products were so low quality that they cause hair loss and skin rashes. One woman said that she was planning to cut her hair short because she could not care for it with the products available at commissary.

JHA raised the issue of low-quality personal care products to administrative staff at the conclusion of our visit. Staff stated that they were unaware of this issue, but would request that better products be made available. Staff also mentioned that they recently introduced hair products for women of color to the facility; the lack of these products had been an issue in the past. The updated March 2023 commissary list now includes more options for shampoo and conditioner, such as Suave brand products. Additional options for body soap, including Dove and Coast brand soaps, are also newly listed. IDOC administrators noted the availability of these products during March 2023 draft review, and also stated that some personal care products that were available at the time of JHA's visit were unscented and not necessarily intended for men.

Under emergency commissary purchasing orders—which remain in effect until a permanent contract can be awarded—IDOC must buy the lowest cost item available, which may have been affecting the quality and selection of items available. Additionally, IDOC has transitioned to using a “unisex” commissary list within prisons. This is intended to address some



### WHAT WOMEN ARE SAYING ABOUT COMMISSARY

*“[O]n commissary we are only sold men’s items, clothing, hygiene products, shoes etc... No Essentials overall.”*

*“Commissary items severely lack quality personal care for women.”*

*“You can not order food, clothes, etc.”*

*“Commissary options and personal care products are terrible.”*

*“We need to be able to order womanly products & clothes every thing is for men the clothes, shoes, body wash, etc.”*

*“There are no quality hygiene products. We’re told that we get only the cheapest available products—even if it makes my hair fall out. We are not treated as people.”*

*“As women, [we] would like hygiene products that do not make our fall out, real toothpaste, deodorant that stops odor and lotion that does not dry out my skin. This is a womans prison run by women can't we please get personals that don't harm us.”*

concerns about item availability, primarily for trans women housed in male prisons, and may have caused some of the observed issues during the transitional period. JHA will continue to advocate for improvements in commissary provision. When JHA visited Logan in December 2022, we were told by administrators there that they had successfully advocated for more items requested by the population to be added after the switch to the unisex commissary list after hearing similar issues to what JHA heard from Decatur in October and we hope that this has resulted to improvements for everyone.

Food scarcity was also a problem reported regarding Decatur's commissary. Many people in custody rely on food products from commissary to supplement the food provided to them by the prison. In JHA's February-April 2022 [Commissary Survey](#), 70% of respondents indicated that their loved ones relied on commissary for at least half of their food. 80% of survey respondents reported that their loved ones were unable to get certain food products from commissary. Several women at Decatur spoke to JHA in October about issues buying food from commissary. For example, one woman said that there were very few snack foods available, no sugar, no hot pots, and they were only allowed to purchase "two packs of meat" per week. Per the March 2023 updated commissary list, the number of food items available for purchase has greatly expanded since JHA's visit.

People in custody also rely on commissary to purchase clothing items, which have likewise become scarce. In particular, several women said that they were unable to purchase underwear from commissary. This echoes the results of JHA's Commissary Survey, in which more than half of respondents indicated that underwear had not been available for purchase. Additionally, people continued to report that the clothing that is available is often unavailable in the correct sizes. Further, as with personal care products, women report that they are often forced to purchase men's clothing. **JHA believes that incarcerated people have the right to wear clothing and use hygiene products that coincide with their gender expression.**

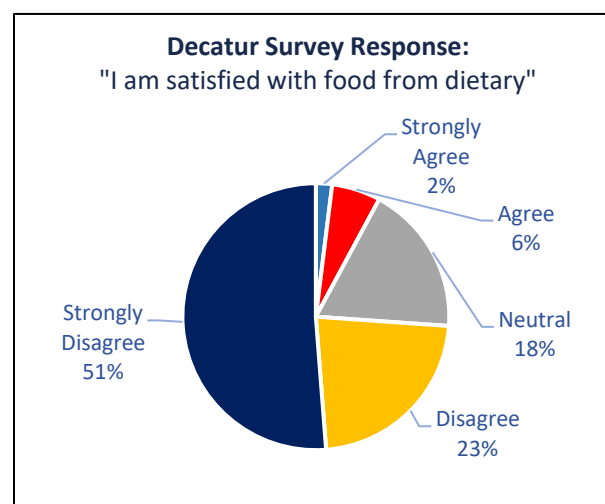
Essential items such as hygiene products are supposed to be provided by IDOC, with additional items periodically provided for indigent people in custody. **JHA has repeatedly requested more information and transparency about expected practices.** Per a December 2021 IDOC Memo titled "Core Hygiene Items and Common Necessities," items such as soap, shampoo, and toilet paper are supposed to be provided to everyone upon intake and on a weekly basis at no cost. Other items, such as deodorant, lotion, and toothpaste are supposed to be provided

upon request. A few women expressed disappointment in their survey responses about the lack of assistance for indigent people, writing that they needed *“more help for people who don’t have money for commissary like everyone else”* and that there were *“no care packages for indigent people.”* One woman simply wrote *“I am too broke to afford food, snacks, hygiene.”* People who are incarcerated deserve to be treated with dignity, and this includes ensuring access to necessities like personal care products and clothing. **JHA continues to recommend that the IDOC gives more information to the public about what products are provided to indigent people in custody and how often they are provided.**

The availability of menstrual hygiene products at commissary has been inconsistent; a woman we spoke with during our visit said that tampons had not been available for the past month. When JHA visited Logan in December 2022, we heard from staff that getting tampons continued to be a challenge. Illinois [Public Act 102-1111](#), signed into law on December 21, 2022, provides that menstrual products “shall be available, as needed, free of charge, at all institutions and facilities of the Department for all committed persons who menstruate.” The bill also provides that underwear will be distributed to those in custody as needed and at no cost. JHA will monitor the implementation of this new law.

## Dietary

Many women spoke with JHA and wrote about issues with dietary at Decatur. Some women were concerned that their food is not safe to consume. As mentioned in the [section on mold and pests](#), some women reported that there were bugs and mice feces in their food. Another woman wrote that the food they were given was often expired. Further, one woman said that they are fed spoiled, gray and green colored lunch meat, which is a bologna commonly referred to in IDOC as *“slick meat.”* Several women described the food as *“inedible,”* with some reports of small pieces of metal in their food. Similar concerns have been consistently reported. However, JHA survey responses suggest that there has been a



noticeable decline in satisfaction during the pandemic. In 2022, only 8% of women at Decatur indicated they were satisfied with food, and 73% disagreed – mostly strongly disagreeing. In pre-COVID [2020 survey](#) responses, 26% of the women at Decatur reported they were satisfied with food from dietary and 47% disagreed. Likewise, in JHA survey results from Decatur in [2017](#), had 26% positive and 47% negative responses to the dietary question.

The lack of variety and a lack of fruits and vegetables was also frequently mentioned. During JHA's visit, one woman stated that they were recently given *"all-purpose patties"* six days in a row for dinner. Someone wrote *"The food is terrible. They feed us the same things all the time."* Further, a few women also said that they were not allotted enough time to eat, with one woman writing *"you either steal your food or chuck it in the garbage."* Two women further reported that they were often not given sufficient amounts of food. We also heard from the women that there were no dietary accommodations for those with chronic health issues, such as diabetes, which is also commonly reported in IDOC. For example, one woman writes that she believes *"Diabetics should get diabetic tray not 4 starches on one tray."* Also, as is common in IDOC prisons, there was a perception among the women that staff receive better food than those in custody. For example, one person wrote that *"they feed the CO special food and allow them to eat it in front of us."*

Adding to food safety concerns, we received reports of the dishwashing machine being broken. This was also the case during our February 2020 visit. Decatur staff indicated in their "5 Year Capital Development Plan," provided to JHA, that they do plan to replace the broken dishwasher. Decatur also plans to "revamp" some of the dietary freezers, which were reported to be broken. Finally, JHA received a letter from a woman who had worked in dietary which detailed a number of food safety concerns. She stressed that basic food safety practices were not enforced, such as wearing a mask, wearing gloves, and washing hands before preparing food. Again, dietary concerns are widespread and historically common within IDOC, however, the situation at Decatur seemed to be worsening in a time of added stress due to commissary issues and ongoing quarantines. **Food is important to health and morale and should not be overlooked. This is an area where improvements should be achievable with some care and effort.**

\* Certain cooks ~~who~~ wear no gloves nor masks while preparing food.

\* Cooks are not regulated as to washing their hands or hygiene habits in the kitchen around the preparation and handling of food.

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022

which leads me to the Dietary Conditions, Dish washing machine has not worked for 2 years. Inmates wash trays and spoons and are not supervised. They feed us food mold, mice feces and Roach droppings on numerous occasions.

—Individual in custody at Decatur, 2022



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (331) 264-4081 or [jvollen@thejha.org](mailto:jvollen@thejha.org)

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff read every letter and track 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 us a voicemail at (312) 291-9183.

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 everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.

