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**Facility Update**



# **Monitoring Visit to Illinois Youth Center – St. Charles 2023**

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# Key Findings

1. There is increased programming for youth who have finished high school, with other programs yet to be implemented which will provide more meaningful activity for these older youth
2. There was an increase in the number of youth who shared their perceptions of positive relationships with staff.
3. Staffing levels and physical plant issues remain a challenge at this facility, even with some improvements having been realized.
4. Although there have been improvements in the past year, the facility continued to struggle with violence between youth.

# Updates

IYC-St. Charles is a male youth center located in St. Charles, Illinois, about 40 miles from Chicago. It serves as the reception and classification center for male youth ages 15 and older who are committed to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) from Northern Illinois. At the time of the visit, it housed male youth ages 15 and up, mostly from Northern Illinois, although any male youth in the custody of IDJJ could theoretically be housed there. Starting in January 2024, it will reportedly only house high school graduates.



When JHA visited St. Charles on August 2, 2023, the population was 49, consistent with its population of 51 at the time of JHA's 2022 visit. Data from St. Charles, which accounts for 46 youth, reflects that 34 of the youth were Black, six were White, four were Hispanic, one was Bi-Racial, and one was Mixed. 18 youth were 18 years or older, 28 were between the ages of 15 and 17, and none were younger than 15. JHA has historically recommended that youth under the age of 15 be diverted from IDJJ's largest youth centers, including St. Charles. 13 youth had been convicted of adult felonies. 17 youth had been committed from Cook County, one was from a collar county, 14 were from other counties in Northern Illinois, 13 were from Central Illinois, and one was from Metro East. In the past, JHA has recommended against housing

youth from the northern part of Central Illinois at Harrisburg (IDJJ's southern-most facility) by default because of its distance from the communities in Central Illinois from which most youth from that part of the state are committed. Both Peoria and Champaign are closer to St. Charles, so JHA was pleased to see some youth from those areas at the facility.

Like other correctional facilities JHA has visited since 2020, St. Charles was reportedly short-staffed with security staff working a lot of overtime. In September 2023, administrators told JHA that they were short approximately 20 Juvenile Justice Specialists (JJS)—IDJJ's entry-level security position. Administrators reported during the visit that IDJJ's changed educational requirements, which went into effect in July 2023, had increased the number of applicants. Despite these staffing challenges, youth reported that school and other programs were not regularly cancelled, which was notable compared to Warrenville and Chicago, where youth reported school cancellations during the 2023 visits. Administrators said that short staffing had the largest impact on offsite programming, such as field trips and educational programming youth attended at local universities. JHA nonetheless heard that St. Charles operated two or three field trips per month, and that youth in the Northwestern University program attended class on campus sporadically when there were enough staff onsite to facilitate, and attended classes remotely when there was not.

Although staff were undoubtedly feeling the stress of low staffing at the facility, youth's comments about staff were almost uniformly positive. One youth reported that staff were "*chill*," and two youth described staff as supportive. JHA did not hear any major concerns about St. Charles staff on the 2021 and 2022 visits, but the overt positivity with which youth described their relationships with staff in 2023 was a notable improvement. Administrators told JHA that they had been focusing on staff development and collaboration between departments in the time since our last visit.

St. Charles was in the process of adding additional onsite programming for high school graduates at the time of JHA's visit. Administrators showed off the nearly complete classroom set to host Larry's Barber College. While St. Charles previously housed a barbering program, it was limited because the space that housed it was not equipped with hair-washing sinks. Administrators also told JHA about the new technical manufacturing program that had started at St. Charles and was planned to expand to Warrenville and Chicago in the near future. St. Charles additionally offered certificate-yielding classes in construction and custodial arts. The

youth center also had the facilities to offer a horticulture program, but the instructor position was vacant at the time of the visit. [IDJJ's August 2023 Quarterly Report](#) indicates that four youth were participating in the above-described continuing education programs at St. Charles.

At the time of the visit, a business marketing class through Northwestern and a constitutional law class through the University of Chicago were being offered to graduates. New since JHA's 2022 visit was a college program through Elgin Community College, where youth could pick their own classes and work up to taking more than one class at once. On the 2022 visit, youth told JHA visitors that they wanted to see more college academic programs offered at the facility, so JHA was pleased to hear that this need was being addressed. St. Charles administrators were also preparing to offer the classroom portion of driver's education at the facility, another need identified by youth who spoke with JHA in 2022.

As previously mentioned, staff at St. Charles reported that field trips were affected by staff shortages, but still took place a couple of times a month. Staff showed JHA visitors a display with photographs from field trips to the Navy Pier, Cirque du Soleil, and a wilderness sanctuary. Staff also told JHA about quarterly family fun days, where each youth could invite up to four family members to participate in onsite activities at the facility, such as a miniature golf. Reportedly, the number of families who attended each event had ranged from one to six. Of IDJJ's three northern IYCs, St. Charles is the least accessible via public transit from Chicago, requiring nearly a three-hour trip each way on two buses and a train from downtown, which could complicate regular travel to the facility for families without cars. JHA also saw the Teen Center at St. Charles—the largest within IDJJ—which hosted programming such as a drum circle as well as being a recreation space. Youth who were in high school generally reported feeling like they had enough to do, while those who were graduates reported feeling bored. This is a common sentiment across IDJJ from youth who are no longer in high school, which is why implementing the new and coming vocational and academic programs at St. Charles is so critical.

Although improvements were evident during JHA's 2023 visit, the facility continued to struggle with violence between youth. JHA visitors heard from youth and staff about a fight that had occurred the evening before the visit, and a youth expressed concern that some security staff were not strong enough to break up fights on their own and that it sometimes took additional staff a while to arrive. Additionally, youth spoke about a physical altercation between several

youth that involved the use of OC spray. The issue was reportedly later resolved via mediation. Administrators provided data in September 2023 indicating that OC spray had been used at St. Charles six times since the beginning of the year. [IDJJ's August 2023 monthly report](#) indicates that OC spray had been used at St. Charles more times between January and August than three of the other youth centers. This was an improvement over 2022, when OC spray was used at St. Charles more than any other youth center.

JHA observed clear efforts to improve the physical plant during the walkthrough. Youth at St. Charles told JHA in 2021 and 2022 that missing ceiling tiles in the dayrooms allowed insects to get into the housing units. On the 2023 visit, JHA noticed that the ceilings in some housing units had been refinished and painted. Administrators said that they were in the process of renovating housing units to remove the ceiling tiles and, where possible, install overhead lighting. There was also an in-progress mural in the teen center. According to staff, an artist came to the facility once a week to work on the mural with youth. Administrators said that they were waiting on a part to regulate the air conditioning in dietary but reported no other significant physical plant issues.

Overall, JHA noticed improvements from 2022 to 2023 most notably in the areas of increased programming and in youth perceptions of positive relationships with staff. Staffing levels and physical plant issues remain a challenge at this facility, even with some improvements having been realized.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9183 or [jvollen@thejha.org](mailto:jvollen@thejha.org)

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report concerns and issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff 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 all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.

