
**Communications
Report**



**Your Words Matter:
JHA Quarterly
Communications
Summary**
July - September 2022

Table of Contents

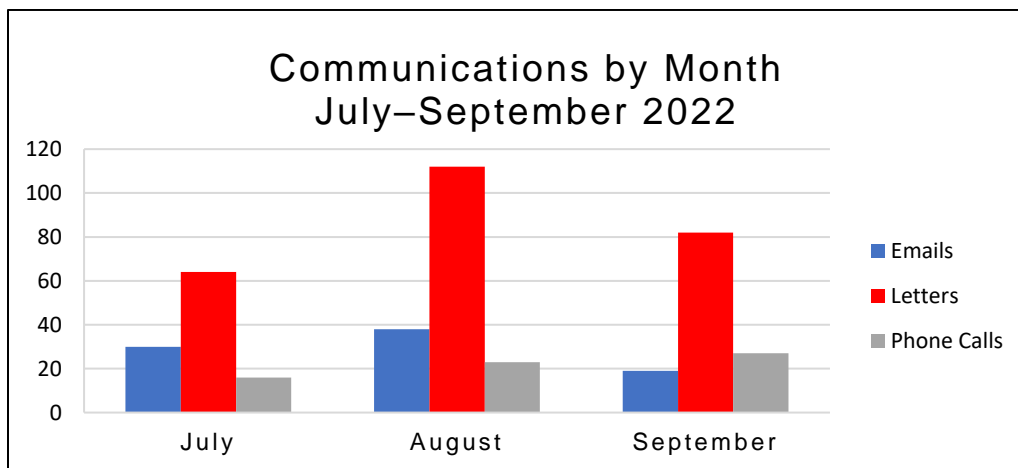
Introduction	3
Access to Information & Communications	6
Inability to Access Information.....	6
Restrictions on Outside Communications	6
Issues Related to Staff	7
Staff Misconduct.....	7
Staff Shortages.....	9
Grievances and Non-Responsiveness	9
Facility conditions	10
Water Quality and Safety.....	11
Extreme Temperatures and Poor Ventilation	11
Medical Concerns	12
Commissary & Dietary	14
Your Words Continue to Direct our Work	16
Thank You!	17

Introduction

Between July and September of 2022, JHA fielded almost 400 communications—including 258 letters from individuals incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). In addition to these letters, JHA received more than 130 calls and emails from people in the community, as well as letters from and communications regarding people in out-of-state, Illinois county and federal, or unknown facilities. This report aims to provide an overview of the most pressing and widely shared concerns and issues people communicated to JHA this quarter regarding IDOC.

We believe that reform and system change must be based on the current realities of our prison system. At JHA, we gather information by going into the prisons to observe, monitor, gather data, and speak with people who live and work inside the facilities. It is the experiences that people in prison share with us that drive our focus areas and advocacy efforts. To inform stakeholders, partners, and the public about the realities of Illinois prisons, JHA shares what we are hearing from individuals in prison through reports, statements, and communications updates. Please note that JHA is not able to investigate or confirm much of the information shared. JHA also acknowledges that there will be wide variation in issues and practices over time and across the state. We share this information as an anecdotal resource to promote system and organizational transparency, and to increase public awareness of the issues impacting people who live and work in Illinois' prisons.

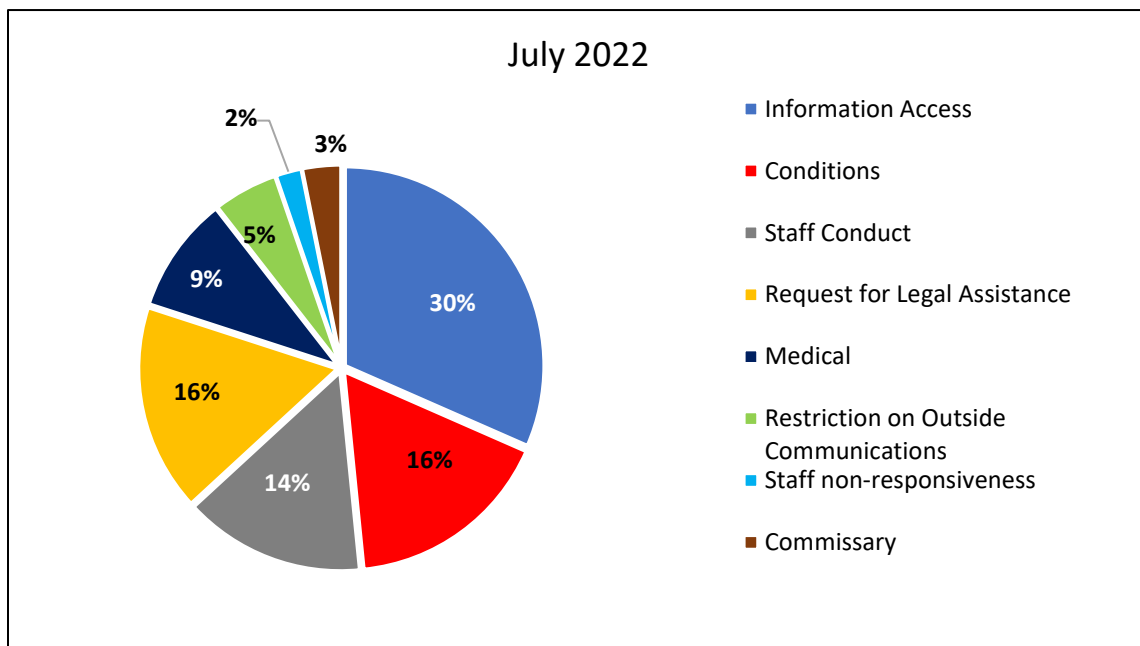
Please check back each quarter to learn more about ongoing and emerging issues, concerns, changes to policies and practices, and efforts to reform our carceral system into one that is rehabilitative, less populous, and humane. **JHA is incredibly thankful to those incarcerated in IDOC facilities – as well as their loved ones – for their vital insight into prison conditions. Your words matter.**



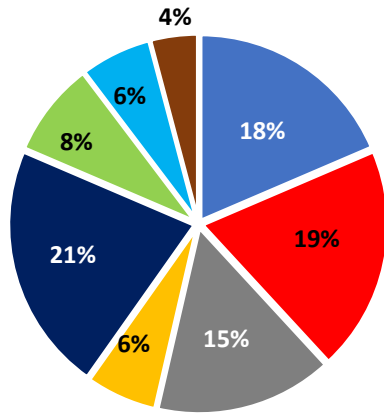
Facilities from which people wrote to JHA the most in July – September 2022:

IDOC Prison	Percentage of Letters	Number of Letters
Pinckneyville	10%	25
Dixon	7%	19
Graham	7%	18
Menard	6%	16
Danville	6%	15
Western	6%	15
Big Muddy	5%	13
Pontiac	5%	12
All other IDOC Facilities	46%	121
County Jails	1%	4

Top issues reported to JHA by quarter:

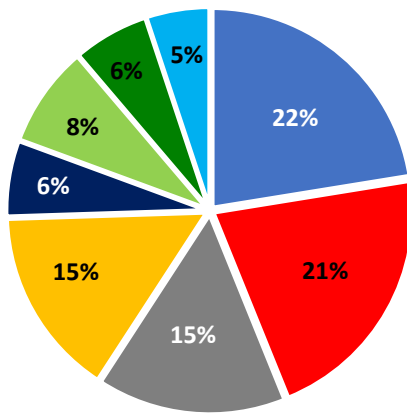


August 2022



- Information Access
- Conditions
- Staff Conduct
- Request for Legal Assistance
- Medical
- Restriction on Outside Communication
- Staff non-responsiveness
- Commissary

September 2022



- Information Access
- Medical
- Staff Conduct
- Conditions
- Lack of out-of-cell time
- Request for Legal Assistance
- Restriction on Outside Communications
- Commissary

Access to Information & Communications

Inability to Access Information

The most common issues raised by people incarcerated in IDOC this quarter, included in 22% of the letters we received, were related to lack of access to information. Primarily, many incarcerated people have asked for information that they were not able to obtain at their facility's law library and information about current IDOC policies. Many individuals have been requesting a copy of IDOC's Department Rule 504: Discipline and Grievances, which is not currently available online. Access to IDOC policies may be critical to know the standards (including those for discipline) which people who are incarcerated are being held to or for information to adequately grieve a concern. IDOC has made some policies publicly available on its [website](#). **JHA continues to request that additional policies be added to the IDOC website and for people to have access to policies within prisons.**

Requests for information access are often accompanied by reports of not being able to access the law library or not being permitted to receive copies of documents needed for court proceedings. For example, one individual in custody at Logan requested that we send them copies of several documents, writing, *"I need these documents printed as proof so I might be able to get re-classified allowing me to go home. I'm begging you."* We have received reports from different prisons that the law library was frequently closed due to a COVID-19 lockdown or staff shortages. One person at Danville stated that staff has been *"using COVID as an excuse"* for not allowing access to the library, while other services in the facility continue to operate.

"When the law library is closed, we have no other means by which to make photocopies or have documents notarized. For at least the past 18 months, the law library has been open and accessible for an average of 2.5 days a week with one of those days reserved for notaries only." – Individual in custody at East Moline, Sept 2022

Restrictions on Outside Communications

Restrictions on communications continue to impede the ability of people in custody to use phone, e-messaging, and video visit services. Phone scarcity and access has long been an issue in many IDOC prisons, but restrictions on movement related to the COVID-19 pandemic and reported short-staffing have exacerbated this problem. One person from Dixon wrote that

“individuals in custody have to plot and conspire against other individuals to use the phone” due to the lack of phone availability and out-of-cell time and noted that:

In each house it is eight phones for 74 cell rooms, which is 148 individuals, that is 18 to 19 individuals to one phone. Other housings units and prisons are similar. It is not about who is sharing and who is not sharing, because it is impossible to share 8 phones between 148 people. Also, Dixon C.C. is short staff members almost everyday, therefore the Dixon only allow 40 people out of their cell for 1 hour and a half making it more harder to share the phones.

- Individual in custody at Dixon, August 2022

Staff shortages and the consequential lack of out-of-cell time and staff dedicated to prompt review of communications also restricts communication access. For example, another person in custody at Dixon wrote that they are *“on lockdown quarantine in these cells 23 ½ hours a day,”* therefore they can neither *“receive an email nor send one out due to Wifi boxes being in the day room area.”* We have also received reports that mail services have been disrupted due to staff shortages. One person in custody at Decatur reported to us that they were *“7 days without outside mail.”*

Contact with loved ones is crucial to the well-being incarcerated people in general, but especially so during stressful events such as a COVID-19 lockdown. **JHA continues to stress the importance of communication and access to information for people in custody and advocate for improvements.**

Issues Related to Staff

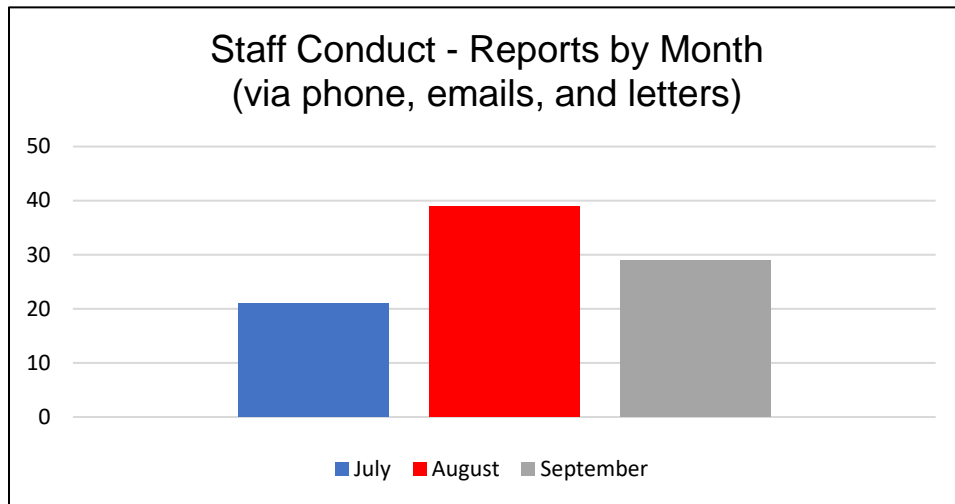
Staff Misconduct

“We are being abused, intimidated, and often times being threaten[ed] by staff.”

– Individual in custody at East Moline, July 2022

Reporting staff misconduct continues to be another common reason people contact JHA. As an organization, we attempt to separate out concerns related to the actions and behavior of individual staff that fall outside of IDOC protocol from those that are a critique of IDOC policy and practices. JHA receives many reports of staff members speaking disrespectfully to people in custody, and sadly, some reports of physical assaults and verbal threats by staff members. For example, one person in custody at Dixon wrote that a staff member *“threaten[ed] to kill*

another inmate with a pad-lock and used the (N-WORD).” This writer also noted that “this is not the first time he has went off on us.”



JHA occasionally receives highly concerning reports of sexual assault or harassment, life-threatening medical issues, use of excessive force by staff, suicides, or homicides of people in custody. This quarter, we received 27 letters that fell within one of these categories. JHA follows up on such reports with IDOC officials when warranted, while respecting the privacy of the reporter. Of these 27 letters, 17 contained reports of sexual assault or harassment. We ensure that the individuals sending these letters receive information about the [Prison Rape Elimination Act \(PREA\)](#), should they wish to file a PREA report and potentially initiate an investigation.

Staff Shortages

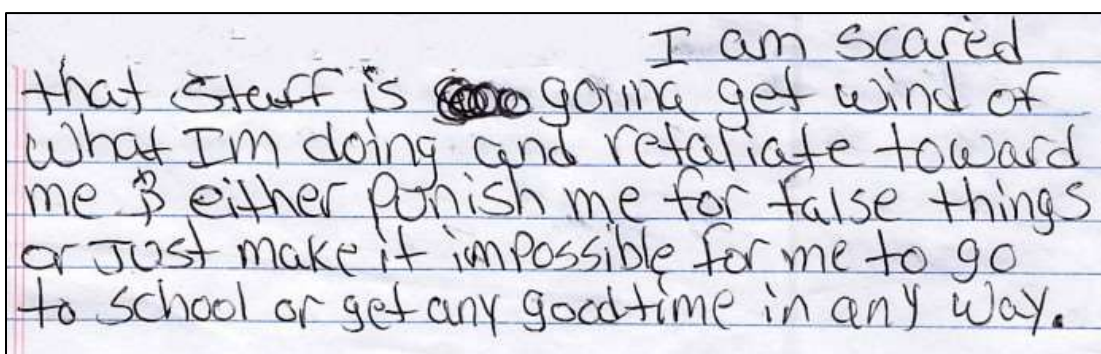
Another issue often reported is the staff shortages that have affected IDOC prisons across the state. These staff shortages result in significant limitations on out-of-cell time and availability of services and programming. As mentioned in relation to communications access above, these shortages can compound pandemic-related restrictions on movement and affect the ability of people in custody to access information and communicate with the outside world. Additionally, shortages result in cuts to services deemed “non-vital,” such as yard and gym time. **We believe that these opportunities for fresh air and activity are not disposable; lack of recreational time can have a major impact on the wellbeing of people in custody.**

- 1) every day almost we are on lockdown for one reason or another
- 2) we are only getting maybe one yard time a month.
- 3) we are getting no gym time at all.

- Individual in Custody at Dixon, August 2022

Grievances and Non-Responsiveness

Non-responsiveness to concerns is one of the most common issues related to staff that we receive, particularly non-responsiveness to grievances. We have received many reports of IDOC staff not responding to grievances, grievances “not being received” by staff, and even the complete unavailability of grievance forms. Several people in custody have also written that they avoid writing grievances for fear of retaliation. For example, we received multiple reports of people in custody being put in disciplinary housing after reporting staff members for misconduct.

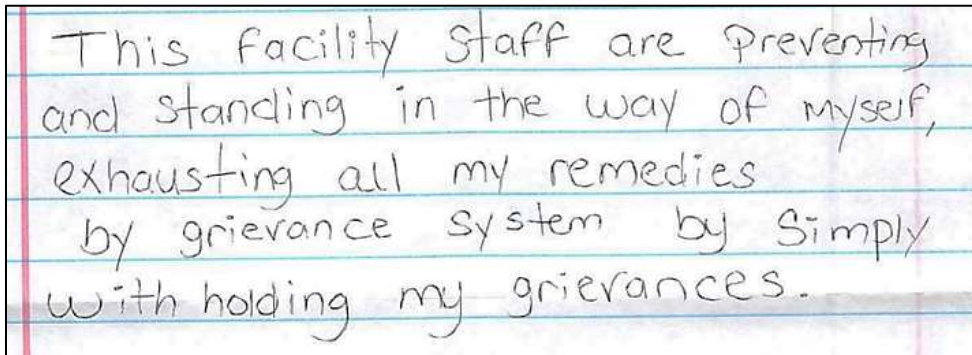


I am scared that staff is ~~going~~ going get wind of what I'm doing and retaliate toward me & either punish me for false things or just make it impossible for me to go to school or get any goodtime in any way.

- Individual in Custody at Jacksonville, July 2022

The issues reported relating to grievances are especially troubling because people in custody must “exhaust” administrative remedies before they can file a lawsuit under the federal Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA). When grievances go missing—or grievance forms are made unavailable—incarcerated people are potentially deprived of their civil right to sue. Further,

people in custody are only given 30 days to appeal a grievance decision in Illinois. This is impossible when grievances are not returned in a timely manner; one individual incarcerated at Jacksonville wrote that a grievance response was returned to them in August that was responded to and signed two months prior, meaning they were now outside the 30-day appeal window.



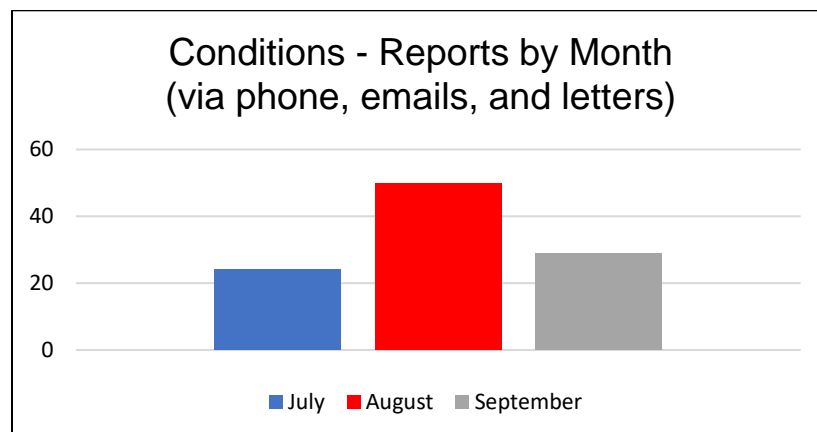
This facility staff are preventing and standing in the way of myself, exhausting all my remedies by grievance system by simply with holding my grievances.

- Individual in Custody at Menard, September 2022

As the primary way for people in custody to resolve incidents and voice their needs, the grievance process is profoundly insufficient. **JHA will continue to advocate for a more effective and fair grievance system, and in the interim, we will work to ensure that the voices of people in custody do not go unheard.**

Facility conditions

Concerns related to facility conditions have also been communicated from people at different prisons across the state. Much of IDOC's prison infrastructure is old and systems are antiquated, with maintenance deferred for many years. As a result, reports include descriptions of the experience of being housed in old buildings where mold, poor ventilation, pest infestations, water issues, and extreme temperatures are regularly reported.



Water Quality and Safety

For years, people incarcerated in IDOC facilities have raised concerns about poor water quality based on taste, odor, and discoloration. Recently, the number and severity of these reports have noticeably increased. For example, one person in custody at Dixon wrote to us describing the water from his sink as “rusty” with “calcium build-up.” An individual at Menard sent us a copy of a boil water order for the facility, but also writes that people in custody have no means to boil said water. Additionally, an individual in custody at Stateville wrote that their “hot water was turned off in June,” has a “high amount of lead,” and “tastes like hand sanitizer.” The water crisis has been further exacerbated by supply chain disruptions and contract disputes, which have limited the availability of bottled water at commissary.

Recent news reports of Legionella, lead, and copper in the water have caused incarcerated people great anxiety. A March 2022 [news report](#) from *The Appeal* indicated that Legionella has been detected in five IDOC facilities. Legionella has also been found in other facilities since that time, such as Decatur and Jacksonville. We have also heard concerns that individuals in custody are not being informed when Legionella is found in the water supply.

Access to safe drinking water is a basic human right and resolving this widespread issue should be a priority. **JHA has communicated this concern to IDOC and is working with other advocates to get environmental protection agencies to undertake a full review, as well as remediation or replacement as indicated.**

“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.” – Individual in custody at Decatur, September 2022

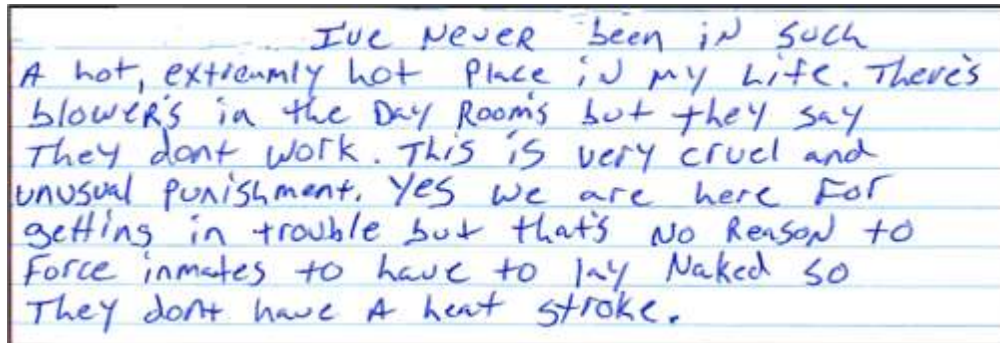
Extreme Temperatures and Poor Ventilation

Extreme temperatures and poor ventilation have been ongoing issues inside IDOC prisons. This quarter, JHA received twenty-two communications about extreme temperatures within IDOC facilities, with several communications reporting temperatures as high as 110 degrees.

The extreme heat within facilities is largely due to the poorly maintained ventilation systems and lack of air conditioning throughout many IDOC facilities. One individual in custody at Dixon wrote that while people in custody suffer from extreme temperatures, officers sit inside a room that are so cold inside that “you can’t see the officers & they can’t see us due to the windows on the bubble being frosted up.” We received two reports this quarter that units at Robinson had poor ventilation and no windows that could be opened; the only air circulation came from staff

occasionally opening the emergency exits. Lack of yard time due to COVID lockdowns and staff shortages further endanger incarcerated people because yard time is sometimes the only way that they can experience fresh air. Fans are available for purchase at commissary, but they are small and largely ineffective at combatting the heat.

As we expect to receive more reports of extreme temperatures as the weather becomes colder, **JHA will continue to monitor this situation and advocate for the health and safety of individuals in custody.**



I've never been in such a hot, extremely hot place in my life. There's blowers in the Day Rooms but they say they don't work. This is very cruel and unusual punishment. YES we are here for getting in trouble but that's no reason to force inmates to have to lay naked so they don't have a heat stroke.

- Individual in custody at Pinckneyville, July 2022

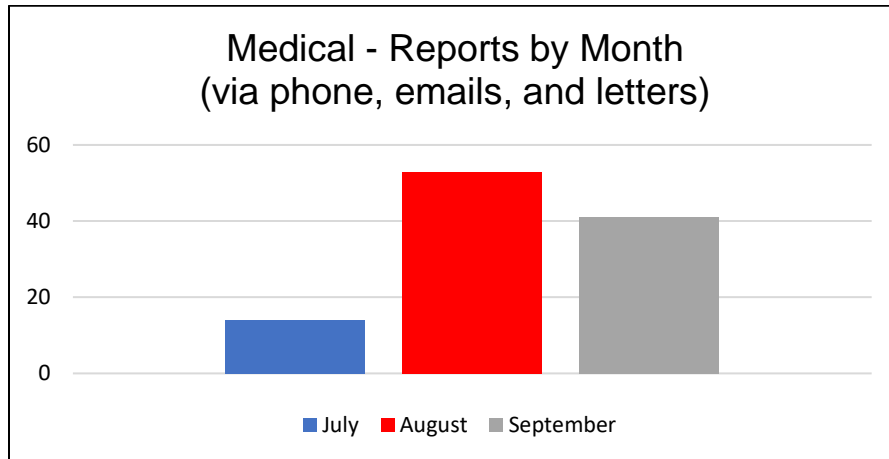
Medical Concerns

JHA continued to receive reports with concerns about COVID prevention and treatment from facilities across the state including from people who are incarcerated who reported that they had not been able to receive COVID boosters. **JHA continues to ask IDOC for data on availability and uptake of COVID vaccine boosters for the incarcerated population and encourage increased availability.** We have also received letters expressing concerns that IDOC staff are contributing to the spread of COVID by failing to wear masks and take other precautions.

Additionally, we noted an uptick of medical concerns reported to JHA. We received 53 unique communications in August about medical concerns and 41 in September, about three times more than what we received in July. Medical care in IDOC, which has long been a major issue due to both quality of care and access issues and is the subject of ongoing [litigation](#) has become even more problematic due to systemic staffing shortages as well as specific medical staffing deficits.

“This Facility[’s] staff have continued to spread COVID to us in prison because staff refuses to wear their masks over their mouth & nose. . . I have seen officers in our rooms mask down/off breathing and touching our property.” – Individual in custody at Western, September 2022

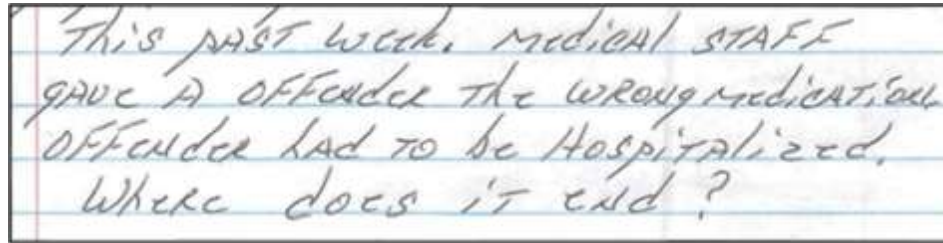
Medical issues range from lack of medication to neglect of serious medical concerns that usually worsen if left untreated. For example, one individual in custody at Jacksonville wrote that a prison doctor told him he had tumors in his chest, but that the cancer is “not spreading.” He nevertheless worries that “they are just hoping I make it through by chance and not by professional opinion.”



When people in custody do receive medical care, we sometimes hear that it is inadequate or even harmful to the person. One individual in custody wrote us from Western that during a dental procedure: “[the dentist] used one of his many instruments to pry and wedge into [the individual’s] upper gums until he broke off not one but 2 teeth.” The incarcerated individual then reported that those two broken teeth are still in his mouth, and he is in so much pain that he “can’t eat solid food.” Instead, he only eats “2 cups of liquid broth, some apple sauce, and juice.”

MEDICAL IS
A JOKE ALSO. THEY DO NOT HAVE A DOCTOR DOWN
HERE SO YOU CANT GET ANY TREATMENT. WHEN
A PERSONS MEDICATION EXPIRES THEY HAVE
TO FIGHT TO GET IT RENEWED BECAUSE THERE
IS NO DOCTOR.

—Individual in custody at Centralia, August 2022



This past week, medical staff gave a offender the wrong medication. Offender had to be hospitalized. Where does it end?

—Individual in custody at East Moline, July 2022

Commissary & Dietary

For much of 2022, IDOC has been experiencing a commissary disruption connected to contracting and procurement issues that began in 2021. JHA has been tracking the situation and pushing for improvements. In the first half of 2022, JHA included questions in our response letters to people in custody regarding details about commissary and dietary. As JHA has [previously noted](#) in reports and statements on this issue, items obtained through commissary are necessities, not luxury items. People wrote to JHA again in this quarter with descriptions of various items that had not been available including basic necessities such as over-the-counter medication, hygiene items, essential clothing, food, and stationary items.

Adding to the frustrations of incarcerated people are the poor food options at dietary. We consistently receive complaints about dietary options being generally bad-tasting, but we also receive concerns about the lack of nutritional value in IDOC meals. For example, one individual in custody at Vienna wrote that they are sometimes fed what they describe as “*animal feed*,” cracked wheat that states on the package “*not for human consumption*.” Many people in custody rely on commissary to supplement their diets. But because certain foods are unavailable or limited at commissary—and because some individuals cannot afford commissary items—people in custody report they are often unable to meet their nutritional needs.

JHA recognizes the severity of the issues with commissary and will continue to urge IDOC administrators to prioritize finding a solution. People who are incarcerated deserve to be treated with dignity, and this includes ensuring that everyone can obtain necessities like hygiene products and food items, many of which the state should provide.

“There is no soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, clothing, electronics, and the food items also. NO rice, noodles, fish, meat, chips, snacks, write-outs. The spending limit is \$100. I’ve yet to spend \$50 and I have over twelve hundred on my inmate account!” – Individual in custody at Danville, August 2022

Several people sent JHA copies of their commissary orders reflecting item unavailability in their letters to JHA, illustrating the scarcity that people in custody are experiencing. Examples of commissary orders from Danville in August 2022:

PERSONAL HYGIENE		
Cocoa Butter Lotion (1)		
Power Up doedorant (1)		
Dial Roll On Doedorant (1)		OUT
Cool Wave toothpaste(1)		OUT
Toothbrush (1)		OUT
Mouthwash (1)	✓	
Comb 5" (1)		
Palm Brush (1)		OUT
Elastic Hair Ties (1)		OUT
Cotton Swabs (1)		
Cocoa Butter Stick (1)		
Shave Gel (1)		
Magic Shave Cream (1)		OUT
Lusti Coconut Oil (1)		
Murray Pomade (1)		
Sulfur 8 Shampoo (1)	✓	
Denture Cleanser (2)		
Denture Adhesive (1)		
Hairgel (1)		OUT
Dental Floss Loops (1) #		
Razor Protec (3) #		OUT
All Laundry Soap (20) #		
Simline Laundry Soap (2) #		OUT

Quantity	ARTICLES	Substitution
4	Beef salami	
4	cheez rice	out
2	oatmeal box	
6	candy bear	
2	Hard candy	out
2	cheez cup	out
2	cookies	
1	Piekie	out
12	noodles	out
1	simline detergent	out
1	colgate toothpaste	out
1	Allergy Pills	
1	Lusti Hair food	

DC 7120 (Rev. 1/99)

Your Words Continue to Direct our Work

- **Follow up:** JHA continues to raise issues we learn about with IDOC Administrators and partner with other advocates and policymakers where issues cannot be resolved.
- **Improving data collection and monitoring work:** We are collaborating with the [Correctional Association of New York](#) and the [Pennsylvania Prison Society](#) to develop best practices for gathering data on prison conditions and independent oversight.
- **New JHA surveys:** In addition to our regular communications, we are currently receiving information from people in IDOC custody using an adaptation of the University of Cambridge Prison Research Centre's Measuring the Quality of Prison Life survey. This project will provide valuable insight on what people experience in prison and allow us to accurately compare different carceral features across prisons in Illinois and as well as in other states. Our survey project is also a tool to better measure transparency across jurisdictions and to help build the field of independent prison monitoring. During this quarter JHA surveyed East Moline, Sheridan, Danville, Decatur, and Stateville; we received approximately 1,000 responses.
- **Implementation check:** JHA has long advocated for IDOC to provide free write-outs for people who are incarcerated to improve access to outside communication, as well as for IDOC to provide other basic necessities free-of-charge. We have been receiving and seeing in prisons these free yellow envelopes provided to people inside. **Please let us know if three free write-outs per month are continually being provided to all or where there may be problems so that we can continue to follow up.**

JHA's Q3 monitoring visits included:

7/1: Joliet Inpatient Treatment Center

7/20: Illinois Youth Center (IYC)-Chicago

8/17: Murphysboro Life Skills Reentry Center

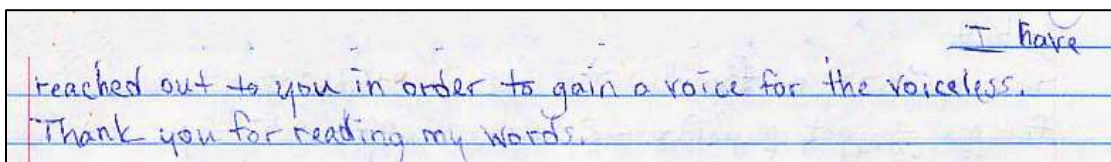
8/18: IYC-Harrisburg

9/13: IYC-Warrenville

9/21-22: Stateville

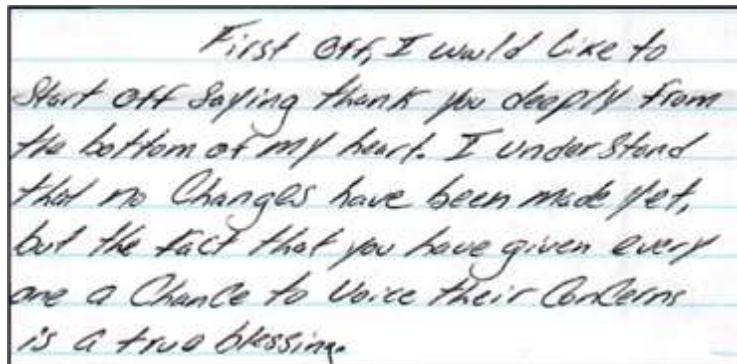
Thank You!

JHA thanks everyone who has reached out to us with information and shared their experiences, insights, and perceptions of what is happening inside Illinois prisons. What you share with us allows us to ask questions, seek more information, and better monitor the implementation of policies and adherence to fair practices by the IDOC. As an independent watchdog group, JHA's impact comes from acting as the eyes and ears of the public inside Illinois prisons. Sharing with us what you see, what you hear, and what you experience strengthens our monitoring work and empowers our advocacy efforts. We also thank everyone who has read this update and listened to others' voices; we hope you will join us in working towards a safer and more humane system.



I have
reached out to you in order to gain a voice for the voiceless.
Thank you for reading my words.

- Individual in custody at Sheridan, September 2022



First off, I would like to
start off saying thank you deeply from
the bottom of my heart. I understand
that no changes have been made yet,
but the fact that you have given every
one a chance to voice their concerns
is a true blessing.

- Individual in custody at Sheridan, July 2022



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

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.

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

