
**Communications
Report**



**Your Words Matter:
JHA Quarterly
Communications
Summary**
October-December 2022

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Introduction

Between October and December of 2022, JHA fielded 440 communications, including 282 letters from individuals incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), 76 phone calls and 82 emails from people in the community, as well as letters from and communications regarding people in out-of-state, Illinois county or federal, or other kinds of custodial facilities. This report aims to provide an overview of the most pressing and widely shared concerns and issues people communicated to JHA this quarter.

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. During the second half of 2022, JHA also began conducting a new survey in IDOC prisons; we continue to field it this year. So far, we have sent it to people incarcerated in 13 facilities and have received more than 3,800 responses.

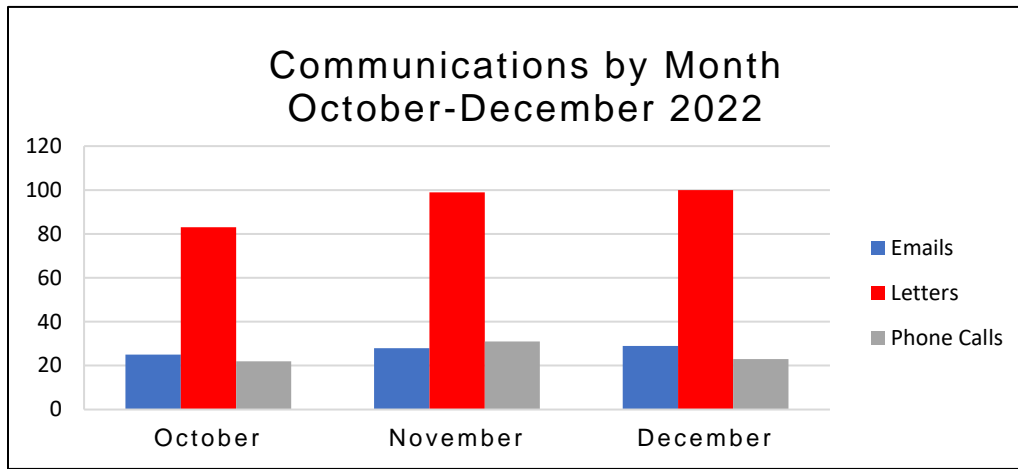
It is the experiences that people in prison share with us that drive our priorities and advocacy efforts. To inform stakeholders, partners, and the public about the realities of Illinois prisons, JHA shares what we are hearing from individuals in prison through reports, statements, and communications 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. [You can find our previous quarterly report here.](#)

JHA is grateful to the people in IDOC facilities, as well as their loved ones, for sharing their experiences, perceptions and insight into what is happening inside our prisons.

Your words matter.

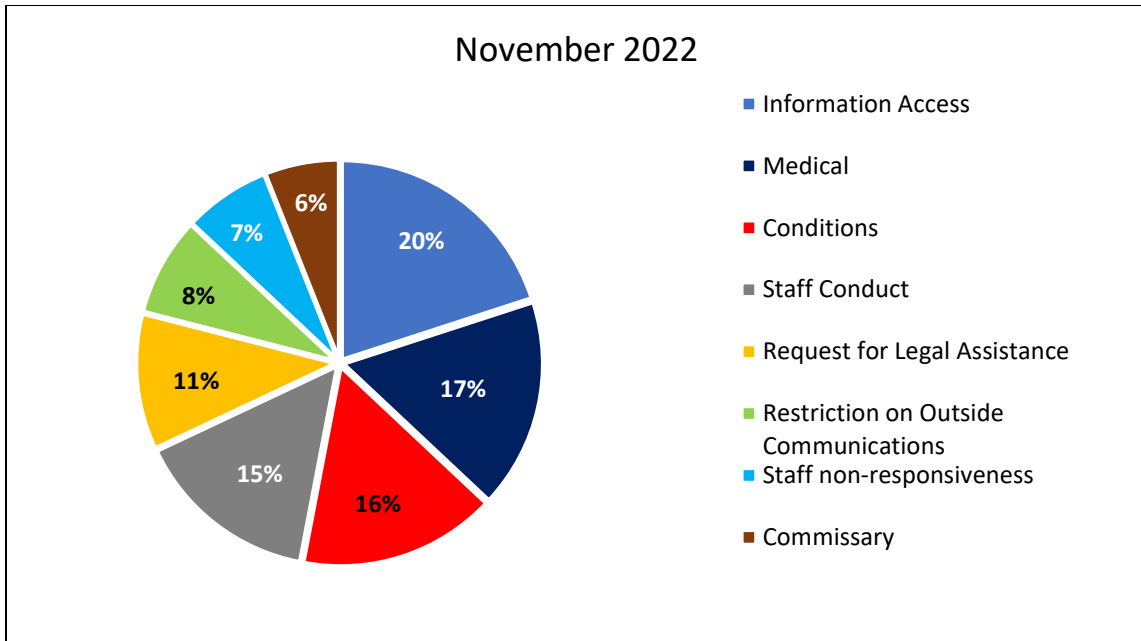
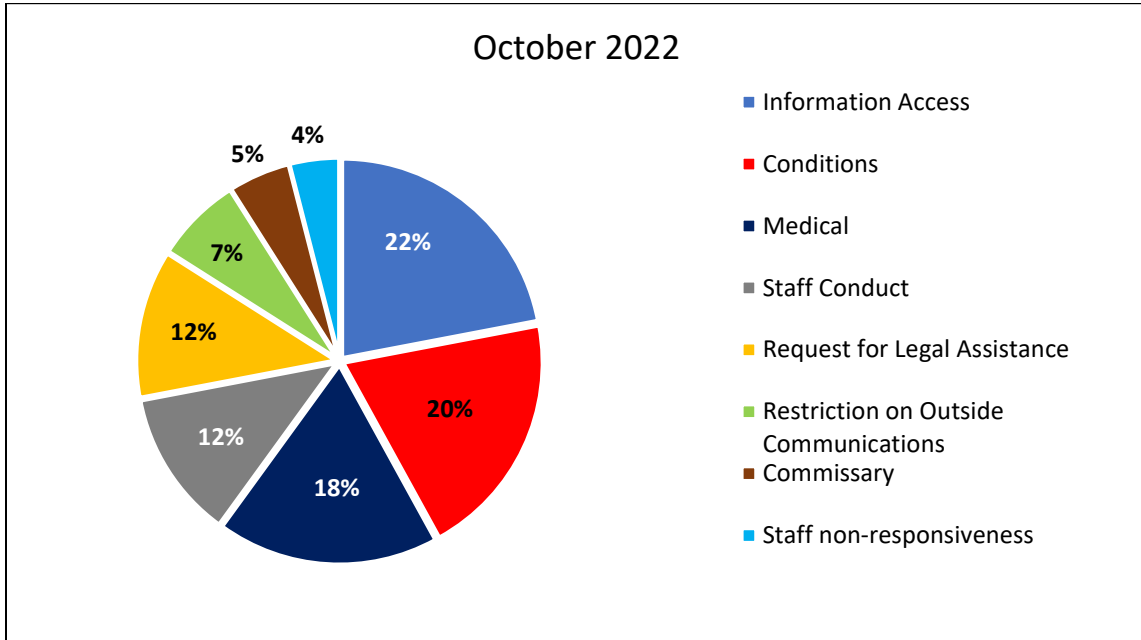
Communications by month:

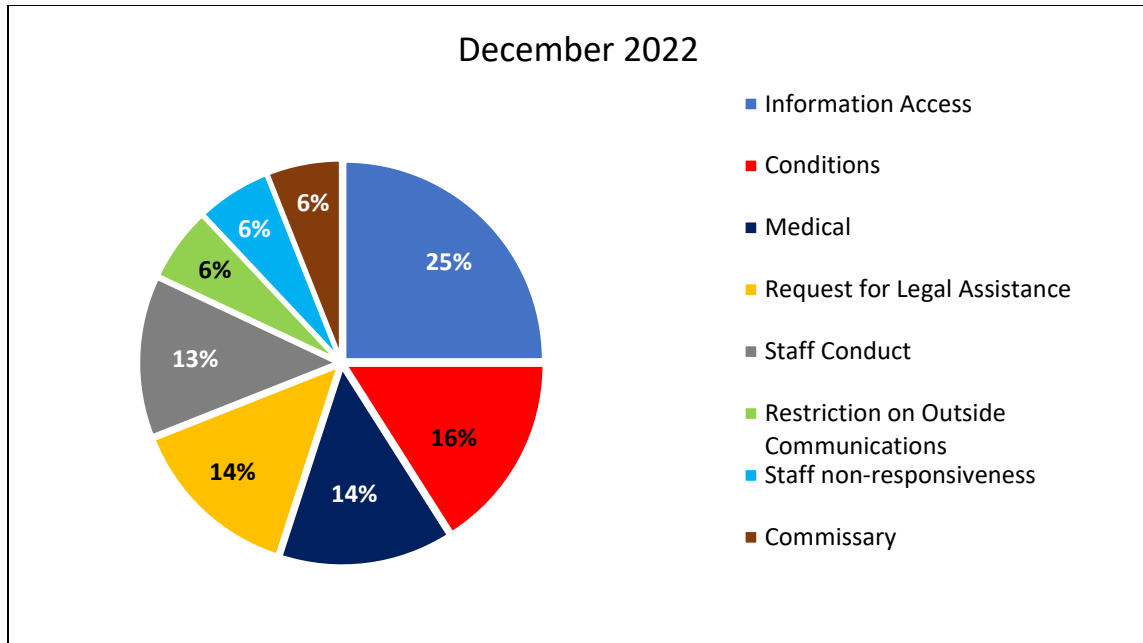


Facilities that people wrote to JHA from the most in October through December 2022:

IDOC Prison	Percentage of Letters	Number of Letters
Pinckneyville	12%	34
Dixon	8%	22
Stateville	6%	17
Menard	5%	15
Graham	5%	14
Western Illinois	5%	14
Big Muddy River	5%	13
Lawrence	4%	12
All other IDOC facilities	38%	107
County Jails	10%	27
Out of state/other	2%	7

Top issues reported to JHA by month:



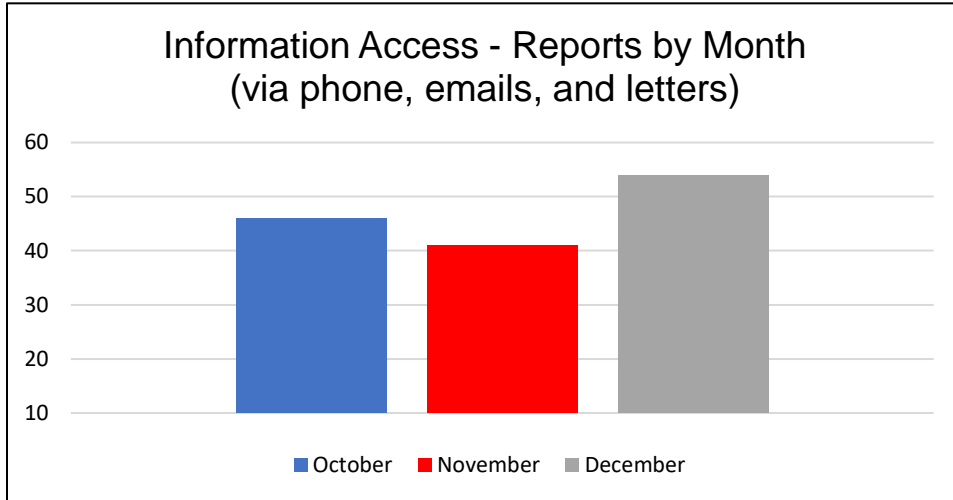


Access to Information and Communications

Inability to Access Information

Following the trends from previous reporting, the most common issues raised by people incarcerated in IDOC this quarter 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 prison’s law library or information about current IDOC policies. Access to IDOC policies is critical, including standards for discipline that people who are incarcerated are being held to or for information to adequately grieve a concern. Requests for access to information spiked in the last month of the year, with a total of 54 accounts reported in December alone. Many IDOC policies are now publicly available to those outside of prison 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.**¹

¹ During review of this report on March 10, 2023, IDOC administrators informed JHA that the Agency is working to ensure that policies are in place and available to people in Illinois prisons by being placed in law libraries and on the website. JHA will continue to monitor policy availability.



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. One example of this lack of access can be physical barriers for people with physical disabilities.

“I am contacting you for information relevant to the Illinois Department of Corrections, because I have not been able to receive such information through my own efforts. Specifically, I have been housed at Western Illinois Correctional Center for 6 years, and FOIA requests for policies and practices governing this prison are not being appropriately communicated to inmates.”

– Individual in custody at Western Illinois, December

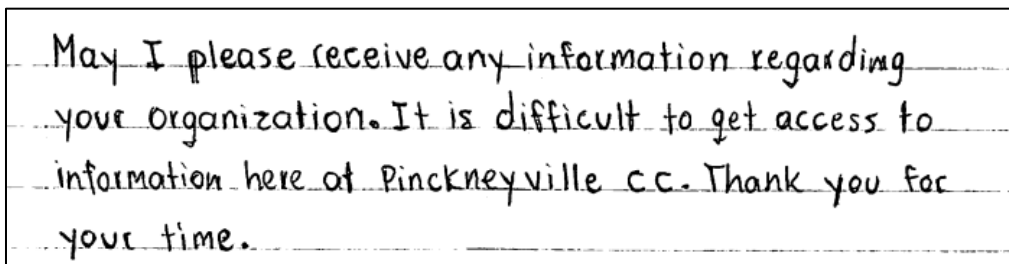
Due to my inability to climb stairs I cannot get to the Law Library to find out what the "Time Limit" period is. Request slips

- Individual in custody at Illinois River, December

Restrictions on Outside Communications

Restrictions on outside communications refers to obstacles to accessing information outside of the facility, such as issues with mail services and phone access, as well as accessing basic information from outside the prison system. Receiving mail in a timely manner has been an ongoing issue for incarcerated people. For example, someone at Sheridan wrote in October that *"the mail process here is super slow and 99% of the time we only receive mail from outside of the prison only on Mondays...Everybody here is waiting for mail."* JHA checks postmark dates on letters and surveys that we receive to better gauge if mail is being delivered in a timely manner.

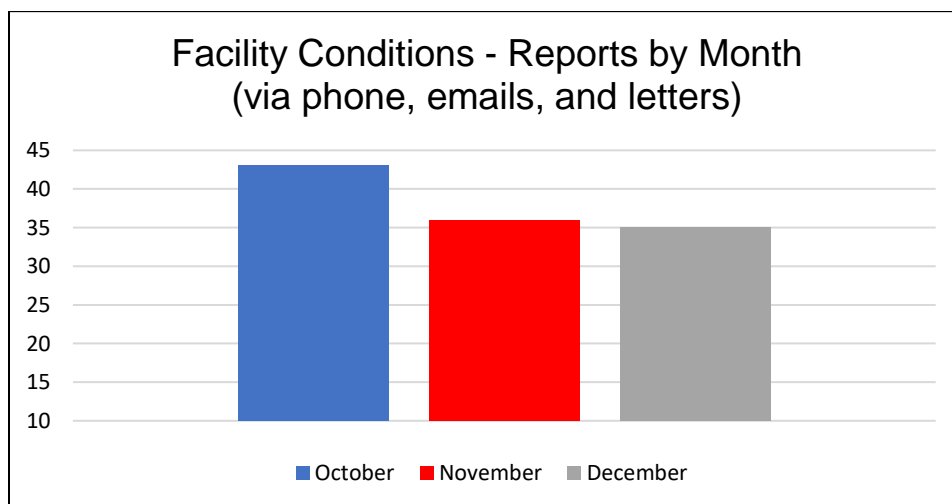
These issues are compounded by the lack of transparency from facilities regarding mail access for those incarcerated. These delays in mail not only hurt people who rely upon mail to stay in touched with loved ones and receive news from outside of prison, but also impact the ability of incarcerated individuals to contact parties outside the system to voice serious concerns that may require immediate follow-up.



May I please receive any information regarding your organization. It is difficult to get access to information here at Pinckneyville CC. Thank you for your time.

-Individual in custody at Pinckneyville, November

Conditions



Concerns related to prison physical conditions have also been frequently communicated from people at different prisons across the state. Much of IDOC's prison infrastructure is old, systems are antiquated, and maintenance has been deferred for many years. As a result, reports include descriptions of the experience of being housed in buildings where mold, poor ventilation, pest infestations, and reports about lack of management around extreme temperatures are received by JHA throughout the year.

Concerns about water in IDOC, ranging from reports about observable substances or discoloration in the water, strange tastes and odors, and fears regarding illness from water have also been longstanding issues in several prisons.

"The building is 'roach infested.' Even the ice machine at dietary is 'full of roaches.'" – Individual in custody at East Moline, October

Extreme Temperatures

Extreme temperatures inside prisons—including lack of air conditioning in the summer and insufficient heat, supplemental clothing, and/or bedding to keep warm in the winter—and poor ventilation have been ongoing issues inside IDOC prisons. However, we have noticed an increase in both the number and severity of these reports this quarter. JHA received twenty-one communications about extreme temperatures within IDOC facilities, with several of the communications reporting temperatures below freezing inside the facilities. Safe living conditions for people in custody is a human right, not a privilege.

The segregation unit down here they lock you behind a still door, you're not allowed a fan in the summer, and the cells are extremely cold in the winter. There are no emergency bottons to push in case of an emergency. Many of us call it a Nazi concentration camp. Summers can get so hot down here, and the inmates in segregation are not allowed cups to drink out of. They have to ~~save~~ save a milk carton 8oz carton for ice that they may, or may not get.

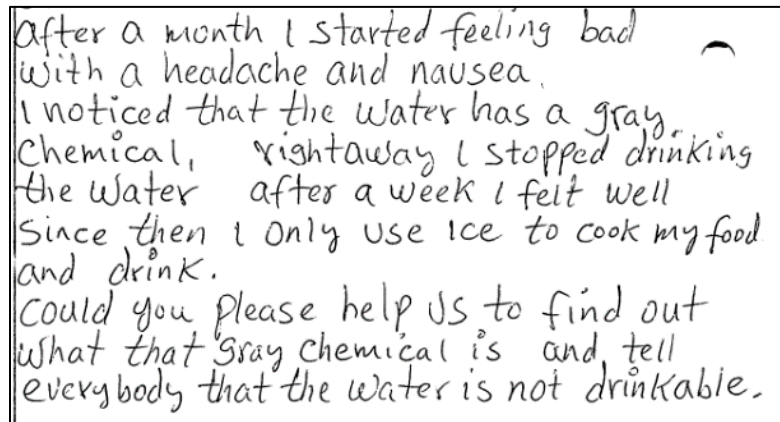
- Individual in custody at Western Illinois, October

The parts of the jail that houses us inmates they have the air turned up to max as if their trying to freez us out to make us cop out into taking prison time.

- Individual in custody at LaSalle County Jail, October

Water Supply

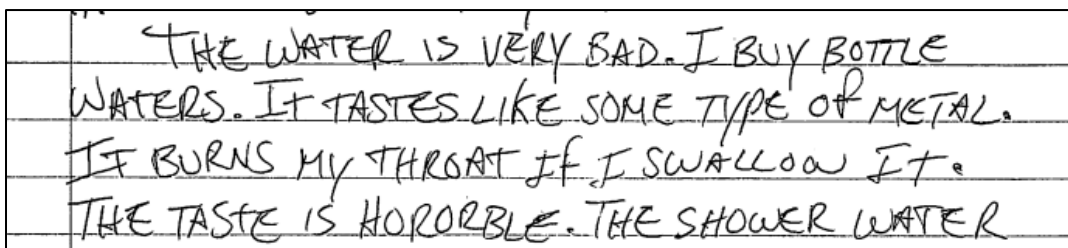
As noted in JHA's [last quarterly communications summary](#), people incarcerated in IDOC facilities have expressed concern about poor water quality based on taste, odor, and discoloration. For example, someone in custody at Danville wrote in November describing that the water "[tastes like bleach sometimes](#)." JHA continues to see increases in the number and severity of these reports.



after a month I started feeling bad with a headache and nausea. I noticed that the water has a gray chemical, rightaway I stopped drinking the water after a week I felt well since then I only use ice to cook my food and drink. Could you please help us to find out what that gray chemical is and tell everybody that the water is not drinkable.

- Individual in custody at Robinson, December

Environmental and prison reform advocates continue to monitor reports and seek information from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency in order to raise specific water system issues to government stakeholders and seek permanent and actionable solutions to protect the safety of people in prisons. It appears that this issue is closely tied to the structural decay of these prisons. News reports of Legionella, lead, and copper in the water understandably concern people in prisons about the quality of water they are ingesting. For example, a July 2022 [news report](#) from *The Appeal* indicated that Legionella has been detected in twelve IDOC facilities, and it has since been found in other facilities. We have also heard concerns that individuals in custody are not being informed by the facility when Legionella is found in the water supply.



THE WATER IS VERY BAD. I BUY BOTTLE WATERS. IT TASTES LIKE SOME TYPE OF METAL. IT BURNS MY THROAT IF I SWALLOW IT. THE TASTE IS HORRIBLE. THE SHOWER WATER

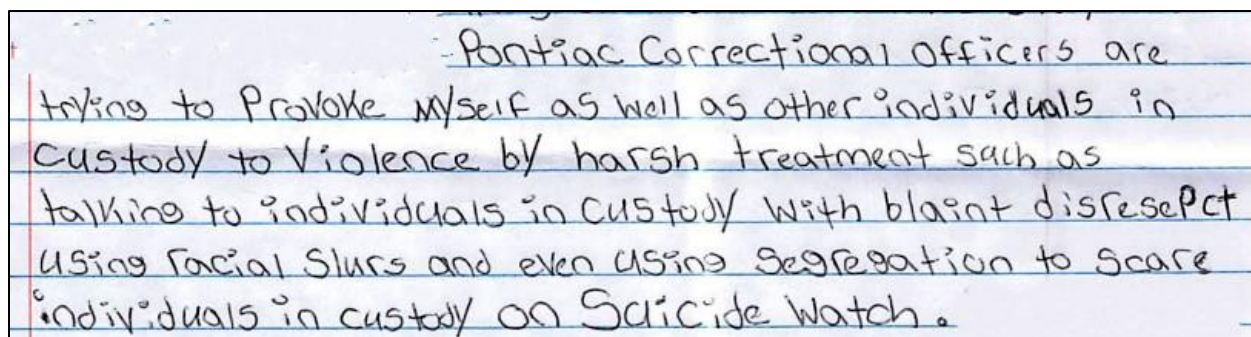
- Individual in custody at Shawnee, December

Water issues have been and continue to be exacerbated by supply chain disruptions and contract disputes, which have limited the availability of bottled water at commissary. In addition to water quality concerns, there have been instances of loss of hot water. On October 26th, the IDOC issued a [statement](#) regarding a loss of hot water at Stateville due to mechanical failure of both of the boilers that comprise the hot water system. IDOC ended up temporarily transferring around 385 individuals to the Northern Reception and Classification Center, located on the same property as Stateville, as well as to other IDOC prisons. **JHA continues to monitor new developments, push for an objective assessment of IDOC water systems, and advocate for the health of incarcerated people along with our partners in the field of environmental justice.**

Issues Related to Staff

Staff Misconduct

Staff misconduct is another recurring issue JHA regularly receives reports on. For example, an individual in custody at Western Illinois wrote in October, *"I've personally heard Guards call Black men stupid ass, morons . . . telling black men to shut their mouths, or get a ticket."* Another individual at Pinckneyville wrote in December that a staff member had *"slammed a Handcuffed older Prisoner's head into steel."* People in custody also frequently report either not receiving a response to grievances concerning staff conduct, or they report fearing that they will be retaliated against if they submit such a grievance. 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.



- Pontiac Correctional officers are trying to provoke myself as well as other individuals in custody to violence by harsh treatment such as talking to individuals in custody with blatant disrespect using racial slurs and even using segregation to scare individuals in custody on suicide watch.

- Individual in custody at Pontiac, December

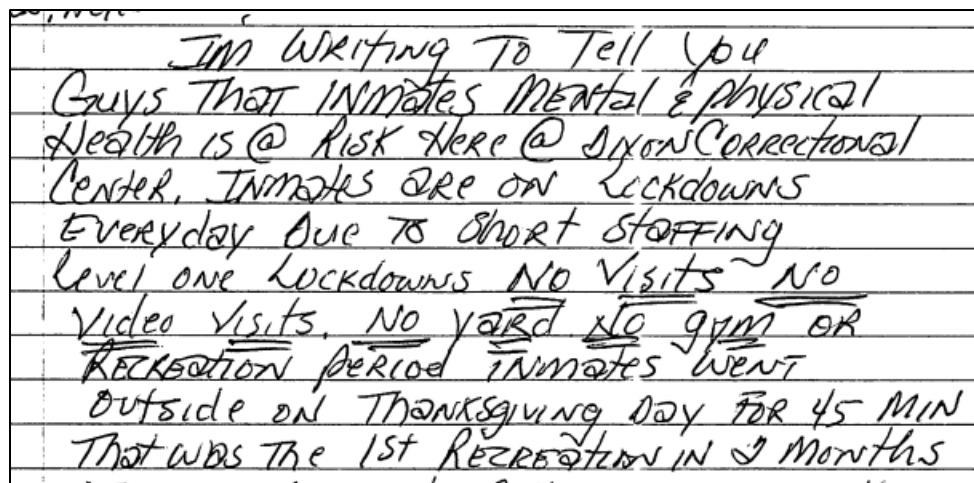
Staff Shortages

There is no Guard stationed on every gallery at night or during the day. once after count these cell can become very dangerous if you're not housed with the right person. Fights happen all the time in these cells early morning hours after midnight. In some cases even during the day. Pressing the emergency botton on the door in these cell, in most cases is useless because the Guards rarely respond. And if you're hurt in a cell by your cellmate, he in most cases won't allow the victim to push the botton to get help. These cell are very dangerous.

This place is very unsafe, especially when you got a staff of people employed who don't give a darn one way or another. Yet they will almost in all cases protect a white Inmate experiencing problem. There have been a few exception when the right Guards are working. However, but rare.

- Individual in custody at Western Illinois, October

Another ongoing issue related to staff that was often reported are the staff shortages that have affected IDOC prisons across the state. An incarcerated individual from Dixon wrote in December, *"Every single constitutionally required action by IDOC is in some way intertwined with proper security staffing... Staffing on a security standpoint is the most fundamental aspect of running a prison. IDOC has failed in this category"*. These staff shortages result in significant limitations on out-of-cell time, communications, and availability of services and programming. We believe that these opportunities are not disposable and can have a major impact on the well-being of people in custody. Reallocation of staff within a facility in order to maximize out of cell time and participation in programming is critically important. As IDOC, like prison systems throughout the country, struggles to fill its workforce, changes must be made to population and practices. Permanent lockdowns are not a tenable solution.



IM WRITING TO TELL YOU
Guys THAT INMATES MENTAL & PHYSICAL
HEALTH IS @ RISK HERE @ DIXON CORRECTIONAL
CENTER. INMATES ARE ON LOCKDOWNS
EVERYDAY DUE TO SHORT STAFFING
LEVEL ONE LOCKDOWNS NO VISITS NO
VIDEO VISITS. NO YARD NO GYM OR
RECREATION PERIOD INMATES WENT
OUTSIDE ON THANKSGIVING DAY FOR 45 MIN
THAT WAS THE 1ST RECREATION IN 9 MONTHS

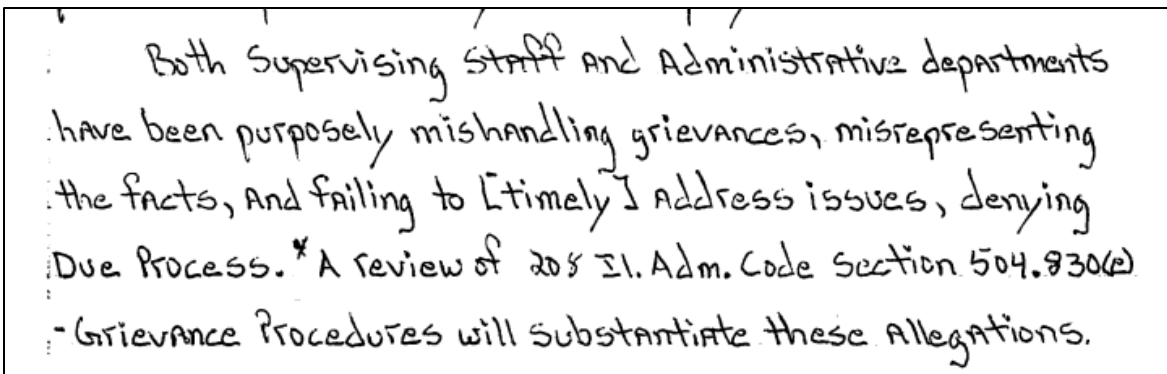
- Individual in custody at Dixon, December

Grievances and Non-Responsiveness

The IDOC grievance system is meant to provide incarcerated individuals with an avenue to voice complaints and questions in writing and receive a response. We have received reports of grievances being denied, staff not responding to grievances, grievances not being received by staff, and even the complete unavailability of grievance forms. [Section 504.830 of Title 20](#) states that “grievances shall be reviewed and a written response provided to the offender,” though people continue to report to JHA that they do not receive written responses. Grievances, including “discrimination based on disability” or accommodation requests, are expected to be forwarded to the facility ADA coordinator for further investigation. Lastly, people in custody may be unable to appropriately exhaust administrative remedies prior to filing a lawsuit, as required under the federal Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), when they are unable to comply with state grievance procedures.

One individual incarcerated in Stateville wrote in October that, *“grievances are not being collected and that’s against my rights. Every Officer says grievances will be collected on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays but that’s not true just watch the cameras.”* Another individual at Pinckneyville wrote in October that they *“have filed the same grievance 3 times in 3 days and for some odd reason they keep getting lost”*.

We have also seen in this quarter several examples of grievances that are simply deemed “moot” by responding officials, giving people no additional information regarding why their issue could not be addressed.



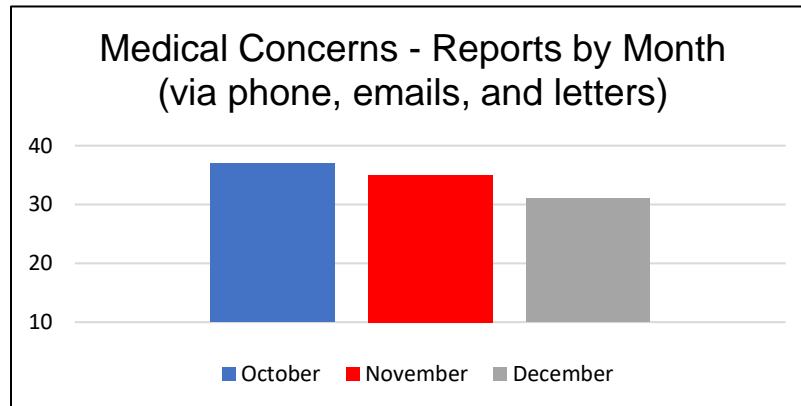
Both Supervising Staff and Administrative departments have been purposely mishandling grievances, misrepresenting the facts, and failing to [timely] address issues, denying Due Process. * A review of 208 Ill. Adm. Code Section 504.830(e) - Grievance Procedures will substantiate these allegations.

- Individual in custody at Shawnee, November

Commonly, the grievance system is perceived by incarcerated people as *“a joke”* that never results in a meaningful response. Information on how to properly file a grievance can be hard to access or understand for those incarcerated or family members that are trying to help their loved ones from the outside. **JHA aims to facilitate a more efficient and just grievance system while ensuring incarcerated individuals that their voices will be heard.**

Medical Concerns

Deficiencies in COVID prevention and treatment continue to be an issue people in IDOC report to JHA. For example, an individual in custody at Sheridan wrote in October that *“less than 40% of all the staff who work in S.C.C. wear mask[s] at all. And out of that 40% maybe 25% actually wears the masks properly.”* Specific concerns and JHA’s advocacy efforts in this area are detailed in our [last quarterly communications update](#).

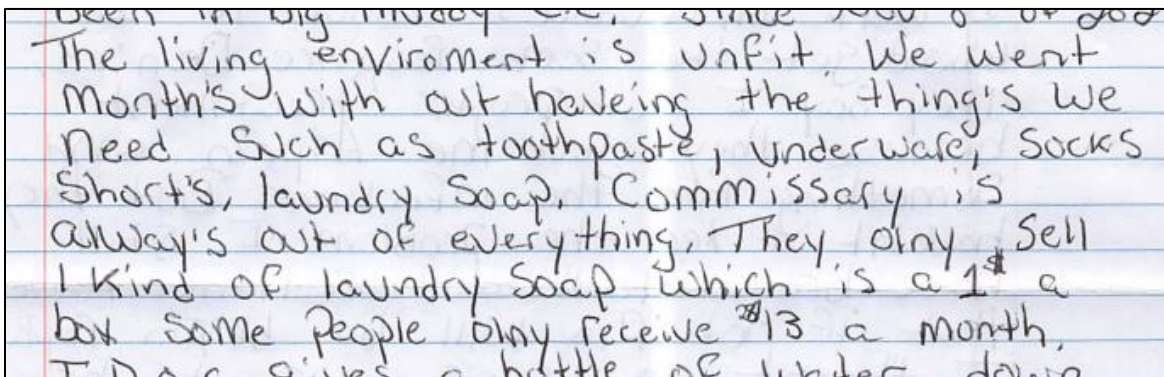


We received 37 unique communications in October about medical concerns, 35 in November, and 31 in December. People incarcerated in IDOC continue to share with JHA that medical care is a major issue for them both in accessing care as well as the quality of care they receive. For example, one individual in custody at Hill wrote in December, *“a surgeon [used] the wrong size prosthetic in my hip”* and after filing a lawsuit, *“the surgeon quit and the hospital closed down.”* An individual at Decatur wrote in December that she was taken to the hospital after days of extreme pain, and was told by a doctor there that she could have avoided much of this suffering *“had [she] not been neglected and dismissed for several days”* by healthcare staff at the prison.

Other people report that they are attempting to see a doctor or any type of medical professional that can address their chronic pain. Someone incarcerated in Western wrote to us in December that he had surgery early in the year but has *“yet to have had a follow-up appointment.”* They wrote that this lack of care has led to them experiencing *“all kinds of complications [including] seizures with all kinds of nerve and body pains.”*

Commissary

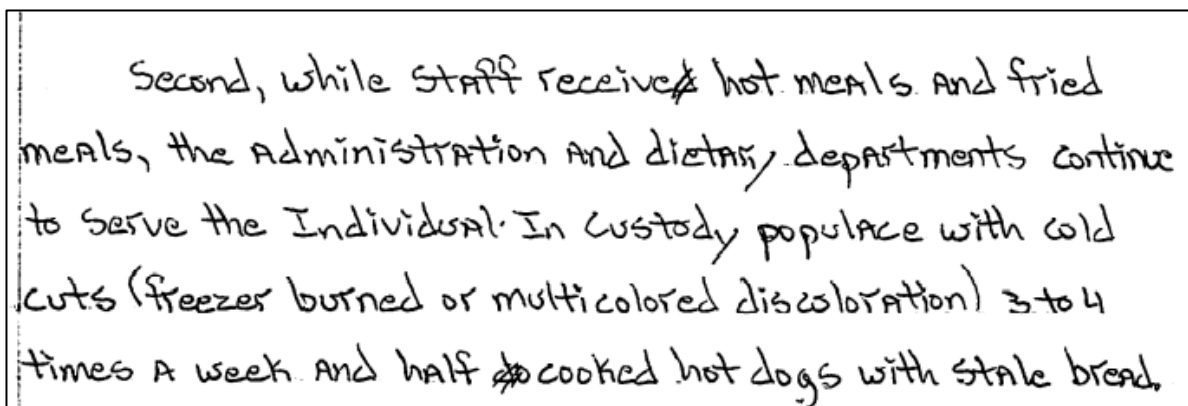
IDOC's commissary services have experienced a decrease in supply and increase in price since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of which is tied to pandemic-related issues and much of which is related to IDOC contracting issues in this area. People continue to report to JHA that many commissary items continue to be unavailable including basic necessities such as over-the-counter medicine, hygiene items, variety in healthy foods, bedding, and stationery items. Given that facility wages for incarcerated workers start at 30 cents per hour, surges in pricing make necessary supplies such as sanitation products, clothing, and clean water unobtainable.



been in big muddy etc, since 2000 or 2008
The living environment is unfit. We went
Month's with out having the things we
Need such as toothpaste, underwear, socks
Short's, laundry soap. Commissary is
allway's out of everything. They only sell
1 kind of laundry soap which is a 1\$ a
box some people only receive \$13 a month,
T.D.A.C gives a bottle of under down

- Individual in custody at Big Muddy River, December

Many people in custody rely on certain food items supplied in commissary that are unavailable in dietary, and people in prison are reporting that due to the increases in food prices on commissary they are unable to meet their nutritional needs. **JHA will continue to advocate for and track the progress on a new permanent commissary contract that provides needed items at reasonable prices.**



Second, while staff receive hot meals and fried
meals, the administration and dietary departments continue
to serve the individual in custody populace with cold
cuts (freezer burned or multicolored discoloration) 3 to 4
times a week and half cooked hot dogs with stale bread.

- Individual in custody at Shawnee, November

Adding to the frustrations of incarcerated people about commissary issues are poor food options and quality in 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. JHA has also received a concerning report where food was not served due to short staffing. Someone at Sheridan wrote in October that *“this is the second time in recent months that a supervisor did not [come] to work and no food was served as a result”*.

Your Words Continue to Direct our Work

- **JHA survey update:** JHA has surveyed Big Muddy, Dixon, Logan, Murphysboro, Pinckneyville, and Vienna using our modified Measuring the Quality of Prison Life survey instrument. We’re analyzing the data from earlier surveys in partnership with Loyola University Chicago and look forward to publishing the first results.
- **Follow up:** JHA reaches out to facility leadership and IDOC administrators with specific issues and areas that need to be addressed after every monitoring visit. We also engage in ongoing conversations with them in order to get data, share concerns, and push forward recommendations to improve policy and practice inside prisons.
- **Collaborative learning and impact:** JHA is working with independent oversight groups in New York and Pennsylvania to improve the impact of prison monitoring in creating systemic change and compare systemic issues across states; we learn from having them join us on prison monitoring visits and joining in prison visits in their jurisdictions.
- **Implementation check:**
 - JHA has long advocated for IDOC to provide free write-outs for people who are incarcerated, as well as for IDOC to provide other basic necessities free-of-charge. We have seen the yellow envelopes provided to people inside free of charge in prison mailrooms and are pleased to report that we have now begun receiving them in the mail. We will continue to monitor the availability and use of these materials.

JHA’s Q4 2022 monitoring visits included:

10/4: Decatur

10/27: Dixon

12/6-7: Logan

JHA’s Q1 2023 monitoring visits included:

1/10: Fox Valley ATC

1/18: Kewanee LSRC

1/19: Peoria ATC

2/8: Crossroads ATC

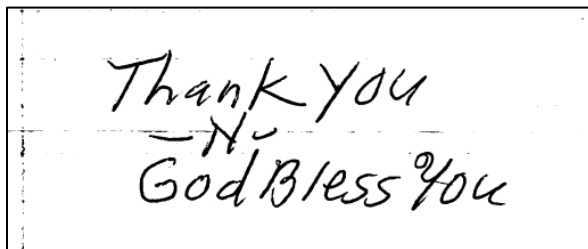
- JHA is currently monitoring the implementation of legislative changes that affect IDOC, including December 2022 changes to Mandatory Supervised Release.

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 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.

"First and for most, I would like to say that "we" appreciate everything you are doing and have done for the inmates in IDOC"

- Individual in custody in Vienna, November



- Individual in custody at Robinson, November



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

