



Jennifer Vollen-Katz, Executive Director, JHA
Opening Remarks at JHA's September 14, 2017 Annual Meeting

On behalf of the John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA), the state's only independent, non-partisan prison watchdog and justice reform advocate, welcome to our 2017 Annual Meeting.

JHA fights to reduce Illinois' reliance on incarceration and for a humane, fair and effective system. JHA is unique in our understanding of both the over-arching system issues that need reform, and the individual needs of people behind bars that must be addressed.

Being inside the prisons and working with many different constituencies, including prisoners, correctional staff and administrators gives us first-hand knowledge of the concerns of both incarcerated individuals and on the widespread system dysfunction that must be changed. JHA's on the ground experience with corrections gives us a strong platform to fight for a more humane and effective system that will lead to better outcomes.

We use our expertise and insight to inform and educate the public, media, policy makers and state leaders and to advocate for the changes needed to reduce the prison population and increase successful outcomes, which include:

- Fewer people returning to the system
- More people leaving prison being able to support themselves
- Communities that are safer

Inherent in these outcomes, but far less discussed, is insisting that our prisons treat all justice involved individuals with respect and dignity.

Our work includes prison visits, reports, policy statements, participation on panels and advisory boards and councils, and this year we implemented a Prison Survey Project. Using specially designed surveys during our monitoring visits, we are able to get feedback from thousands more people than we can talk to during a single visit. The surveys offer an anonymous and safe way for inmates and staff to communicate issues and concerns to JHA - this information drives our work by providing greater insight into the perspectives and concerns of those who live and work inside our prisons.

This year JHA will respond to more letters from prisoners than ever before in our 116-year history, by the end of this year we will have answered at least 4,000 communications from people in prisons and their loved ones. Every letter and communication receives a response, and all the issues raised in letters, emails and



calls are recorded and tracked in order to better inform our work and note trends within facilities and system wide. Our prison response unit gives us another window into the lived reality of people in prisons, and through our responses, we are able to acknowledge our shared humanity even if we cannot always achieve the desired relief or result they seek.

In many ways, we are buoyed by the reforms taking hold in Illinois, due to JHA efforts, some of the most dangerous and inhumane prisons or units have been shut down or changed, like the closing of the Round house at Stateville, and the closure of Kewanee for Illinois youth and its reopening as a reentry center for adults. On the flip side, there is increased interest in prison privatization, programming and treatment deficits due to budget cuts, resistance to reform and culture change within our prisons, and political rhetoric that echoes failed approaches and unfair practices of the past, making our work urgent and unfinished.

Illinois needs a system that is smart, safe, and effective. JHA has long pushed Illinois to achieve this by relying less on incarceration and more on:

- At the very front end, diversion programs to keep people out of the justice system altogether. Treating people whose risks and needs indicate that they are not a threat to public safety and who have the potential to engage in meaningful, productive lives, should be helped to do so.
- For those who end up in the deep end of our system, far more programming and job skill training inside prisons is needed to give people employable skills when they leave and a meaningful life while they are incarcerated.
- Better and increased medical care and mental health treatment is paramount to the health and wellbeing of our incarcerated population and our communities.
- Providing meaningful opportunities and tracking systems for people to earn time off their sentences, and providing opportunities for people who are elderly, ill, or no longer pose a safety risk to be reevaluated for possibility of early release
- We must put in place reentry supports that are not only wraparound but address people's specific and individual needs, such as:
 - Ensuring that when people walk out of prison they have necessary medications and prescriptions in order to manage medical or mental health conditions – this keeps them and their communities safe, and this investment in care pays large dividends by improving quality of life and in dollars saved by reducing reliance on emergency care to meet primary needs.
 - Making sure that people have referrals for treatment so they can get the support they need.



- Having a State ID - JHA has fought hard to make sure that every person leaving state custody has a copy of their birth certificate and a State ID, at no cost to the individual. Without a state ID, a person cannot apply for jobs, housing and other necessary programs and benefits.

It is through our work in the prison system that JHA is able to identify these real and often basic needs – giving people these tools provides path to success. Advocating to make these common-sense steps law is a hallmark of JHA's work, and we are thrilled that many of them are now in place to provide people with more opportunity to succeed outside the justice system and prison.

JHA will continue to fight for system transparency and accountability – history tells us that closed systems cannot be left to police themselves. Without independent people or groups going into prisons, they remain out of sight and mind for most Illinois citizens. Without independent oversight, abuse or disregard for rules and policy can flourish, leading to devastating results.

Without JHA being inside our prisons and making citizens aware of the realities of the conditions, practices and treatment, holding the system and its leaders accountable is a concept, not a reality.

Transparency comes from being in the prisons and constantly pushing the State to make information and data about and from the corrections system, publicly available. JHA was founded on the belief that we must hold our State leaders accountable for the outcomes in our criminal justice system. This is how change is made.

Today we are fortunate to have a speaker that inspires our work by grounding it in fact and reality. John Pfaff, author of the book “Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform” writes about the true drivers of our bloated prison system and uses data to show both the intended and unintended consequences and impact of some of the popular but misguided criminal justice policies of the last several decades. His fact and data based analysis debunks common misconceptions about the criminal justice system, and provides insight into:

- The actual drivers of incarceration
- The need to think differently about who is in our prisons and why they are there
- The role of local politics and prosecutors in filling our prisons
- How we can respond differently to crime and achieve better results

JHA's work is made possible by the tireless efforts of our staff and volunteers. I want to thank all of them for their hard work and dedication. I also want to thank all of our supporters and funders – it is your fundamental belief in the importance of



having an independent prison watchdog in Illinois that allows us to fight for and achieve needed reforms.

JHA is proud to serve and humbled by the thousands of people who believe in our work, who read our reports, who champion critical prison reforms, and who share our vision of a fair, humane and effective criminal justice system that promotes public safety while treating all citizens with respect and dignity.