



John Howard Association of Illinois

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Executive Summary: Monitoring Visit to IYC-Harrisburg 3/23/11

On March 23, 2011, the John Howard Association visited IYC-Harrisburg, Southern Illinois' Medium Security facility for boys.



Vital Statistics:

Population: 239

Average Age: 17.2

Average annual cost per youth:
\$69,321

Population by Race: 73 White (30%),
157 Black (66%), 8 Hispanic (3%), 1
Asian (1%)

Source: IDJJ (3/23/2011)

Key Observations

- While many youth in IDJJ have their GED or high school diploma, Harrisburg is the only facility that offers youth post-secondary educational opportunities.
- Harrisburg over utilizes solitary confinement. The facility sent youth to confinement more often than any other IDJJ facility, 122 times in January and 103 times in February of 2011. The average time of stay for a youth in confinement was over one and a half days. Facility administration should more critical in its review of confinements.
- Youth spend up to three and a half hours of idle time a day locked in their cells because there are not enough organized activities. In total youth spend nearly half the day locked in their cells.
- Technical parole violators make up more than 50 percent of Harrisburg's population – another sign that the state needs to do more to reintegrate youth back into their home communities and provide more support upon release.
- There are 25 juveniles eligible to leave IYC-Harrisburg, but must remain incarcerated because the state has not approved a residence for release.
- Individual mental health counseling is insufficient. Youth needing therapy receive one 45 minute session every two weeks. Administration acknowledged the lack of attention to mental health needs often results in crisis intervention rather than traditional therapy.

Models for Change

Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

The preparation of this report was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Illinois Models for Change Initiative

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School

Harrisburg is the only IDJJ facility that offers post-secondary education. Through a contract with Southern Illinois College (SIC), youth who have obtained their GED or high school diploma can take classes in Computer Technology, Business Management, or Horticulture. Youth can also earn certifications in food preparation and commercial janitorial services. In the past, the school has also offered electrical and construction training, but these teacher positions are currently vacant.

The school, part of IDJJ's school district 428, is relatively well staffed with a total of 24 teachers. The school also employs a speech pathologist that it shares with IYC-Murphysboro. The school psychologist tests for special education needs, creates Individual Education Plans (IEP) as necessary, works with youth, and heads up a team in the school to respond to special needs or circumstances. Currently, five of the 24 teachers are certified in special education and 40 students have IEPs.

Although Harrisburg's reported student to teacher ratio is low, 10:1, the actual ratio is higher due to chronic teacher absences. According to the school's administration, the problem is that while teachers frequently call in sick, the contract with American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), along with security issues, prevents facilities from using substitute teachers. Consequently when teachers are absent, their students are simply moved into other classes. According to AFSCME representatives, IDJJ has never raised the possibility of hiring substitute teachers with union leadership.

The school's facilities are acceptable. Due to the large number of teachers, the administration moved some classes into the basement. While the basement is a bit industrial looking, the classrooms are well kept and similar to any other class. Educational posters and inspirational sayings line many of the walls throughout the school.

The materials provided to students vary in quality. For example, one classroom used textbooks from 1991, but had computers that were no more than five years old. Any textbook produced 20 years ago must be severely outdated and should be replaced.

One particularly impressive program in the school is the student council. Elected by other students, council members meet with school and facility administration to discuss potential changes. Most recently, the student council reached an agreement with administration to allow youth to wear braids in their hair. The council informs all the youth of new policies at the beginning of the school day.

School Discipline

Harrisburg has implemented the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support system (PBIS) in the school. PBIS is designed to promote good behavior through positive reinforcement, behavioral modeling, and intervention. Intervention occurs in a designated area called the Ready to Learn (RTL) room where youth who misbehave are sent to reflect on their behavior and discuss strategies to avoid future problems.

RTL is meant to take the place of disciplinary tickets in all but the most extreme or dangerous circumstances. This is not the case at Harrisburg. Administration, staff, and teachers told JHA that some teachers often write tickets for talking in class or other minor disciplinary problems that are common in any classroom setting. JHA met with two youth in RTL who had received tickets for similar minor issues. This is troubling because the Prisoner Review Board (PRB) considers the number of tickets a youth has received when it determines whether to parole him or her, and the PRB may not distinguish between minor and major infractions. Each ticket is essentially a mark against their release.

In addition, PBIS calls for data collection to determine which teachers need more training on how to encourage good behavior without taking negative actions. Though administration stated they examine ticketing patterns, they did not see a general problem with ticket writing in school.

All of this said, the school staff seems dedicated, and most of the junior members of the faculty have been there for at least five years.

Recommendation: End the practice of writing tickets when teachers send youth to RTL.

Confinement/Discipline

Although Harrisburg's use of confinement has declined in recent years, the facility still uses it too often. Harrisburg used confinement 122 times in January and 103 times in February of 2011, more than any other IDJJ facility. The average time of stay for a youth in confinement was over one and a half days.

While staff checks on the youth at regular intervals, confinement is still a very isolating experience. Confinement is a separate unit of single-bunked cells. The youth are completely isolated and have no interaction with any other youth. Stripped of their

normal clothing, youth are put in a jumpsuit (similar to coveralls) with Velcro up the front and can have no property in their cell.

The most common reason youth were confined at Harrisburg was for “intimidation,” a kind of catchall category rarely used in the other IDJJ facilities. Several individuals in administrative and supervisory roles told JHA that they believe some staff will accuse youth of intimidation because they know it will lead to them being put into confinement. This is not to say that youth cited for intimidation did not misbehave somehow, rather that their actual behavior may not have justified confinement.

It is important to point out that a Superintendent has the power to review confinements and order youth released if he or she feels their punishment was inappropriate. When JHA asked Harrisburg’s Superintendent, Robbie Price, why he did not overrule more questionable confinements based on intimidation tickets, he reported that he was reluctant to do so because if a youth were to assault a staff member or another youth after being released, IDJJ would be liable. Regardless, Harrisburg’s administration must exercise oversight over its use of confinement.

JHA witnessed first hand the overuse and misuse of segregation at Harrisburg. In terms of overuse, when JHA arrived for our visit we were told that there were four youth in confinement. When we visited the confinement unit three hours later, we were told there were 10 youth in confinement plus two youth in the unit for mental health observation. Six of the youth were scheduled to be let out of confinement in the evening. Several of the youth in confinement had been there for multiple days without a shower. When IDJJ administration noticed this, they asked the youth why they had not showered. The youth responded that no one had asked if they wanted to shower.

As for misuse of confinement, JHA witnessed a particularly troubling incident when one youth was taken to confinement for eating a JHA staff member’s food with the permission of the staff member. Guards immediately reacted, telling the youth he could not eat the food and within one minute were taking the youth to confinement. The facility prohibits youth from sharing food, but that rule would not apply in this case. Upon learning of the misunderstanding, administration assured JHA the youth would be let out, but the youth was still there when JHA arrived in confinement and only let out once JHA raised the issue again.

Nearly all of the youth said and many staff that JHA interviewed admitted that discipline depended on the staff member. Youth are subject to a sort of lottery, based on which staff members work in their housing units. In particular, youth and administration pointed to certain staff members who were known to be disrespectful to youth and generally looked for reasons to punish them. When JHA asked the administration what it was doing to discipline these staff members, the administration replied that they could not terminate them due to the union’s contract. IDJJ’s union members may have strong employee protections, but the administration must find ways to hold their staff accountable.

Another problem with discipline is that although staff, administration, and youth all named particularly punitive staff members, there is no formal tracking process to collect data to support or refute their accusations. Additionally, IDJJ has no formal entry of the staff member who sent a youth to confinement, meaning that a department could not easily conduct a system-wide review of its confinement practices.

Even when youth are not put in confinement, they may be ticketed for minor behavioral issues. For instance, the administration recently required that all youth must walk with their hands behind their back when moving from building to building. If youth fail to observe this rule, they will receive a ticket. Some youth reported receiving a 15-day Administrative Review Date (ARD) extension as punishment for failure to follow the policy. Youth do, however, have the chance to earn this time back with good behavior.

The problem with writing tickets as a regular form of discipline is the same as discussed regarding tickets in school. An ARD hearing can be as short as 15-minutes, and a youth's file is the first impression given to any Prisoner Review Board member hearing his case. If a youth has a large number of tickets, whether for minor or major rule violations, it can have a negative impact on the final decision of the PRB.

Youth may request a hearing to challenge tickets, though it is unclear how many youth realize that they have that right. A related, though unresolved question is whether youth should be provided with representation if they choose to challenge ticket.

Recommendation: IDJJ's facilities should track which staff are utilizing confinement. This would help IDJJ ensure fair application of its rules and identify staff who should be transferred to an adult facility, receive intensive training of proper protocol, behavior intervention, and discipline, or be dismissed.

Recommendation: Rather than writing tickets for minor violations or misbehaviors, Harrisburg should use behavioral modification tools or positive reinforcement.

Recommendation: Given the potential abuse of ticket writing and the negative impact on a youth's release, JHA recommends that youth be provided with representation if he chooses to challenge a ticket.

Rewards for Good Behavior

Harrisburg operates under the same three level behavioral classification system as other facilities, with level one serving as the best status and level three the worst. Depending on their level, youth are given an increased number privileges including more phone calls, special events, or even a later time to be locked in their cell at night. In addition, the Superintendent has implemented other positive rewards to encourage good behavior. One such program rewards housing units with a pizza party if there are no fights for the entire

month. This creates an environment where all the youth have an incentive to avoid fighting.

Harrisburg is one of only two IDJJ facilities that gives more days in ARD reductions than ARD extensions. ARDs are parole hearings for youth. Reducing the time youth must wait for their next opportunity for release is not only a great way to incentivize good behavior, but also a recognition that youth may not need to stay in custody as long as originally estimated. Many of IDJJ's other facilities give no ARD reductions or a minimal amount compared to ARD extensions.

Staffing

Like most IDJJ facilities, Harrisburg suffers from significant staff vacancies. For instance, Harrisburg has been without an Assistant Superintendent of Programs for three and a half years. This vacancy may help to explain the general lack of programming discussed below, which highlights the importance of this position. Other vacancies include: three nurses, one Juvenile Justice and Family Specialist Supervisor, three Youth and Family Specialists (counselors), and one Social Worker. All of these positions are necessary to provide basic services and counseling to the youth.

The current training program and directives prevent the proper training of veteran staff. New Juvenile Justice Specialists have been trained in youth trauma, behavioral intervention, and other tools to help them deal with youth in a productive manner. Training for veteran staff, however, in these same issues is not happening on a regular basis, nor is the time allotted sufficient when training is offered. Many youth voiced complaints about the difference between the new staff and veteran staff.

Another issue that is apparent when entering the facility is the lack of staff diversity. IYC-Harrisburg's population is 2/3 African American, but JHA saw only two non-white staff during our visit, both of whom were teachers.

Recommendation: JHA understands that hiring must be based on who applies. However, if the lack of staff diversity persists, cultural competency training should be a high priority for the facility and more effort should be made to reach out to the minority community surrounding the facility for applicants or volunteers.

Programming

Harrisburg's programming is largely the same as at other facilities. It offers anger management, pre-release program (Parole School), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, parenting classes, behavior modification, and social skills. Each of these programs is run as a mental health group. In total, just under half of the youth in the facility participate in one of these groups.

In addition to the programs listed above, a number of volunteers participate in Bible studies, Catholic and Muslim services, a tutoring program, and a “parent surrogate program.” Twenty-nine volunteers participate in these programs for a total of 1444 hours per year.

Leisure time is not sufficiently organized at Harrisburg. The facility only has one Leisure Activity Specialist, who often lets a housing unit security staff decide what activities will be done on a daily basis. The facility has a baseball diamond and basketball courts available outside as well as an indoor gym, but often activities are not organized, leaving youth simply to spend their idle time playing cards or other games.

During our visit, JHA entered several units after lunch where half the youth were locked in their cells and the other half were playing cards. The youth were not in school because Wednesday is always a half day. The youth stated that typically no one would be out of their cell during this time and that the staff let them out because they knew the John Howard Association was coming. Whether or not this is true, JHA could not get a sufficient explanation for why half the youth were locked in their cells at this time. Further, facility reports confirm that youth are locked in their cells for a total of 11.5 hours a day, far beyond the time used for sleep. This is a sign that either Harrisburg does not have enough activities or that staff have not received proper instruction on leisure activities.

Youth admitted that they play basketball or baseball at times, but expressed that they generally feel they have little to do when they are not in school. Administration acknowledged that often the security staff watch television with the youth rather than organize an activity or take them outside.

JHA recognizes that our visits are a snapshot and that youth may exaggerate certain issues. Therefore we should recognize that according to facility documents the following activities are available to youth:

Behavioral Level One exclusively:

- DVD Movies: daily
- Teen center (games, ping-pong, “social-recreation”, etc): 15-30 youth Mon- Sat
- Super Teen Center (video games, foosball, popcorn and soda): 40 youth Mon-Sat. If youth remain Level One for the entire month.
- Tournaments: (in sports or games): As scheduled

All Behavioral Levels:

- Outside Recreation or Gym: By living unit three to four times per week one hour at a time.
- Special events: As scheduled
- Photos: 100 youth once a month
- Tournaments: 100 youth as scheduled Social Recreation (bingo or other games for canteen items): 40 youth no particular schedule.

The facilities' response also indicated that youth spend zero to one hour per day in organized activities and two and a half hours a day in idle time.

Recommendation: A more formalized system should be implemented requiring each housing unit to participate in organized outdoor activities several times per week.

Housing Units

Harrisburg is made up of many different kinds of housing units. Aside from Reception and Classification and the Substance Abuse units, the units are single bunk units, meaning youth have their own cells.

The General Population units are nearly identical, consisting of cells lining two walls with a common area in the middle. A staff room enclosed in safety glass is located at one end of each unit. The cells have very little natural light. The common areas are drab, painted in neutral colors, and receive no natural light. Each common area has a TV and several game tables bolted to the floor. JHA staff inquired about allowing youth to paint murals in the units, similar to some of the other IDJJ facilities, and administration reported that this has begun in the gym and is exploring expanding it to housing units.

The Maximum Security unit is isolated from all other units in the facility, except during school hours. Youth are assigned to Maximum Security based on a reception and classification tool that looks at committing offenses, past criminal history, past institutional history, and several other factors. All of the Maximum-Security youth expressed a desire to interact with youth in other units. They said that they felt isolated and left out of many activities. Although they had the chance to meet other youth while in school, they said they did not have the chance to play sports with them or talk much due to school policy. When JHA visited the Maximum Security unit, all of the youth were locked in their cells except for two youth who were cleaning the common area; again, youth said that this was common. Nonetheless, youth in the Maximum Security unit seemed to generally respect the security staff on their unit and reported no serious problems with staff.

The substance abuse unit is run under contract by Civigenics. The program is modeled on the twelve-step program, but typically focuses on the first five. Civigenics staff told JHA that they strive to create a community treatment model that combines group work and relapse prevention. Youth who are further in the program have the opportunity to help new arrivals. Upon graduating from the program, youth put their handprints on the wall with their name. This practice has the added benefit of making the environment more colorful, especially compared to the other units. When JHA arrived at the unit, the substance-abuse staff were leaving to go upstairs, leaving all youth locked in their cells. One administrator pointed out, and JHA agrees, that once group finished, these staff

could have stayed on the unit and continued to provide programming for the youth rather than returning to their offices.

Mental Health

Mental health is provided through a mixture of contract and state employees. The facility currently has seven mental health staff for a population of 239 youth. The staff consists of a Psychiatrist for 10 hours per week, a Psychologist for 35 hours per week, three full-time Social Workers, and two full-time Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors. The mental health staff run the groups listed in the programming section of this report, which takes up a considerable amount of their time.

In addition, the mental health staff provides individualized mental health treatment to 135 youth in the facility. Due to the large number of youth and comparatively small staff, the individualized treatment consists of one 45-minute session every two weeks. Administration admitted that this was not ideal, and that it has often resulted in crisis intervention rather than traditional therapy.

Ideally, Family and Youth Specialists (counselors) would provide more one-on-one work with the youth, with each housing unit having their own counselor. However, current staffing levels force counselors to be assigned to youth on need-by-need basis, and counselors must travel from unit to unit or have youth brought to their offices. This is a waste of time and robs the youth of chances to interact one-on-one with counselors.

During JHA's visit, many youth and staff said that certain counselors almost never came to see youth to whom they were assigned, and if they did see them, it was only to fill out necessary paperwork. The names were consistently used and both staff and administration confirmed the youths' accounts. IDJJ must find a way to overcome this problem. Youth need individual interaction with counselors and the services they are meant to provide including family contact and linkage to outside services.

Recommendation: A policy should be put in place to have one counselor assigned to each housing unit, reducing wasted time traveling throughout the facility and allowing for more one-on-one interaction between youth and their counselors.

Parole/Release

As noted in JHA's report on IYC-Warrenville, juvenile parole is creating a large influx of youth returning to IDJJ. On the day of JHA's visit, 133 of the 239 youth in the facility were there for technical parole violations. Technical parole violations are violations of parole, but not new crimes. Examples include failing a drug test, skipping school, moving out of your approved placement residence, or even contact with police during an investigation.

The fact that more than 50 percent of the youth in Harrisburg are technical parole violators demonstrates that there is a serious problem with Illinois' juvenile parole system. Placing numerous parole restrictions on youth does little to help them re-enter society. In fact, as these numbers indicate, these restrictions simply lead to youth being separated from their families and communities for longer periods of time without any clear benefit to public safety. IDJJ will soon place its first group of After Care Specialists who are meant to help youth adjust to parole and connect them with the services they need. In the next few years, however, these specialists will only serve Cook County youth; only ten youth in Harrisburg are from Cook County. An overhaul of the entire juvenile parole system is the only way to solve the problem of incarcerating youth for technical parole violations.

Harrisburg also has 25 youth who have been approved for release, but remain in the facility because their placement has not been approved. This number does not include youth who have become wards of the state through DCFS. One youth JHA interviewed has been awaiting placement for over 18 months. The facility has no influence on whether placement is approved or not; it is the responsibility of the parole division. Placement can be denied for many reasons including the number of people staying at the residence, criminal records of people at the residence, and the presence of children. JHA heard from youth that often a placement may be denied once or twice and then finally approved without adequate explanation.

Grievances

The grievance policy is explained in the Youth Orientation Manual given to each youth upon their admittance into Harrisburg. It follows a similar process as all other IDJJ facilities. First youth are encouraged to approach their counselor or administration informally. If they feel the grievance has not been resolved they can then file a formal grievance to be reviewed and investigated by a grievance officer. If youth are still not satisfied, they can appeal to the Administrative Review Board in Springfield.

One difference between Harrisburg and other facilities is the designated grievance officer. After hearing from many youth that the grievance officer was not neutral, Superintendent Price appointed the Chaplain to be the grievance officer. Generally the youth JHA spoke with were satisfied with this decision, but still did not feel that all grievances were given a fair hearing.

In addition to the grievance process, Superintendent Price takes personal notes from youth regarding requests or problems. During our visit many youth passed the Superintendent notes requesting things like new shoes, asking about visitation, and other topics. The youth seemed very comfortable doing this, and told JHA that they regularly received responses or obtained what they had requested.

Finally, Superintendent Price agreed to allow JHA to post signs in each housing unit with JHA's mailing address and subject matters about which they should write to JHA. This will allow youth to voice concerns that they may not feel comfortable sharing with people at the facility, as well as help JHA collect data regarding complaints and work with facilities to address problem areas.

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This report was written by Chris Bernard, Director of the John Howard Association's Juvenile Justice Project. He may be reached at (312) 503-6303 or cbernard@thejha.org.

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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 instrumental in improving prison conditions.

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