



# John Howard Association of Illinois

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## **Monitoring Visit to IYC-Chicago December 17, 2010**

On December 17, 2010 the John Howard Association conducted a visit at IYC-Chicago. Below are our observations.

### **Physical Plant**

IYC-Chicago was designed as a maximum security juvenile facility to house the anticipated explosion of juvenile “super-predators” predicted to emerge in the early nineties. The predictions proved inaccurate, however, and responding to actual needs, IYC-Chicago serves as a minimum security facility with a particular focus on youth who are within six months of their release dates.

The contradiction between the maximum security design of the facility and the youth incarcerated there is stark. The only outside recreational area is a concrete basketball court in an area that doubles as a loading dock—this area is closed during the winter. Moreover, youths’ rooms closely resemble prison cells. Although slightly bigger than the average adult prison cell, the rooms are barren and heavy metal doors lock from the outside. Adding to the sterility of the rooms, all property must fit in and be kept in a property box. IDJJ is currently looking to end the use of property boxes, but lacks the necessary funding to implement the change.

Some walls in the facility are covered with murals painted by past residents. Though new murals are not prohibited, there is no one with the responsibility of coordinating new murals. An Art Therapist position could solve this problem, but funds for new positions are scarce. There are also some program themed posters and other inspirational signs, but for the most part the walls remain blank and are painted in neutral tones.

As JHA has noted in the past, the facility lacks any foliage. Indoor plants could add a great deal of warmth to the facility, and are particularly important since many of the youth are unable to go outdoors for months at a time. During our visit the facility was decorated for Christmas with donated artificial trees and other decorations administration could acquire on their limited budget. Although the decorations were not impressive in scope or quality, they went a long way to soften the facility. Seasonal decorations throughout the year would be a great way to add warmth.

*Observations: The facility still has the feel of a maximum security institution. Though administration is limited by the building itself, small additions could go a long way.*

*Recommendations: Implement a system to allow current residents to replace old murals or add new murals to the blank spaces on the walls. Bring in plants that could be maintained by the youth.*

## **School**

The school at IYC Chicago is very small and consists of five classrooms. Four of the classrooms are accessed through the library and the fifth is located just outside of the main school area. The library is a small triangular room: two walls are shelved with books; the third wall has windows that look into the hallway and is occupied by relatively new computers, which lack internet access.

Students attend school 6 hours on each weekday except Thursdays when they only attend in the morning, totaling 26.5 hours per week. The acting principal is in the process of implementing a Positive Behavior Interventions Support (PBIS) program in the school. IYC-St. Charles has implemented PBIS in its school, providing a model for IYC-Chicago. PBIS involves modeling and teaching expectations of good behavior, proactive behavioral modification, and rewarding good behavior rather than punishing bad behavior. The facility will create a list of behavioral expectations for the students, which will also apply to staff. In some cases of misconduct students are referred to the Ready to Learn program (RTL), any referral to RTL requires a form to be filled out by the teacher detailing the behavior involved and management tools the teacher used to correct the issue. The RTL referrals serve as the alternative to disciplinary write ups while the students are in school.

Although it takes time to train staff and teachers in PBIS, the advantage of PBIS is its focus on data-driven reform, meaning data is collected to determine the effectiveness of the program and the staff in the school. PBIS is also intended to minimize the amount of time students spend out of the classroom for behavioral issues. The administration will continue evaluation of the program and consider other behavioral models if needed.

During the visit, JHA observed one juvenile justice specialist speak to a youth sitting in the library after being sent out of class. After determining why the youth had been sent out of class, the specialist immediately took the youth back to the room and requested that the teacher allow him to return. This is a promising development and if teachers are trained in the same manner as this juvenile justice specialist, youth will spend less time out of class.

Due to the physical set up and a lack of resources, IYC-Chicago does not offer any vocational training or post-high school or post-GED educational opportunities. IDJJ is exploring partnering with universities and other schools to solve this issue, but as of yet nothing has come to fruition.

There are five teachers employed at IYC-Chicago, one of whom is certified in special education. The school has four staffing vacancies, principal, office coordinator, science teacher, and gym teacher. The principal's position was vacated on November 30, 2010. Another teacher would make it possible to

shrink classes and allow students to be trained on and use the computers in the library. Currently, students seldom have access to the computers. A seventh teacher would be ideal so the school could have a P.E. teacher; this would allow for more one on one interaction between teachers and students.

As previous JHA reports have indicated, the hiring process for teachers presents a serious obstacle. Applicants often accept other job offers before the various levels of required approval are satisfied and the search must start over from the beginning.

*Observations: The computers are under-utilized. Teachers and staff seem to have different methods of discipline. There are no educational opportunities past a high school diploma or GED. Two more teachers would accomplish much.*

*Recommendations: Implement the PBIS training for all staff and teachers as soon as possible. Request that the facility be allowed to connect student computers to the internet, with appropriate filtering software. Hire a teacher for computer class and seek to open a second teacher's position for a P.E. teacher.*

## **Staff**

IYC-Chicago recently hired a new superintendent, Angela Wartowski. Ms. Wartowski is a former teacher and state's attorney in Winnebago County Juvenile court. She is also currently pursuing her masters in education to be certified as a principal. It was clear from our visit that Ms. Wartowski makes interaction with the youth a priority. Many of the youth seemed excited to see her and to tell her about their accomplishments. At one point a group of youth from the halfway back program was preparing to put on a skit with a group of TASC workers. Though the youth did not want to do the skit in front of our group, they specifically requested that Ms. Wartowski stay to watch.

The other staff at the facility seemed to genuinely care about the youth put in their care. Staff members volunteer their time to work with youth in sports tournaments, recreational activities, and community field trips. During the holidays, special programming and events are coordinated by staff, many of whom use their own money to buy gifts for the residents.

When JHA asked whether staff received training in how to deal with and recognize traumatized youth, staff mentioned informal collaboration when youth exhibit problem behavior. In February 2010, all staff were given training in trauma. Additional training is given to staff on a cycle. Superintendent Wartowski stated that "cross training" would be a priority in the coming months, so that staff with experience and knowledge in certain areas could train other staff members.

There are several vacant positions at the facility including: Asst. Superintendent of Operations, Asst. Superintendent of Programs, Corrections Food Service Supervisor, Juvenile Justice Youth & Family Specialist and Supervisor, Business Manager, and Executive Secretary. Some of these positions will be filled soon, others have been vacant for quite some time.

*Observations: Generally staff seem caring and interact well with the youth. Formal training between staff is needed.*

*Recommendations: IDJJ should fill the vacancies. The formal “cross training” should be implemented as soon as practicable.*

## **Mental Health**

Mental health services are provided by two part-time psychologists (20 hours per week each) and one part-time psychiatrist (5 hours per week and as needed). IDJJ classifies youth by mental health levels ranging from no level to urgent; at the time of our visit IYC-Chicago held 20 youth with no mental health level and 56 youth at the “minimum” mental health need level.

The mental health staff runs three separate mental health groups while DHS volunteers run a fourth specifically geared toward youth with trauma. In total, 34 youth participate. Youth are assigned to these groups by mental health staff based on file reviews and screening instruments. The staff run groups focused on social skills, emotional identification and regulation, and anger management. Another group, Aggression Replacement Training (ART), is a pilot program run by educators, security staff, and substance abuse counselors. ART will be reviewed once success data is available and possibly implemented at other facilities.

JHA volunteers and staff were surprised to learn at the time of our visit the facility had no youth on psychotropic medications. Although the facility houses only the lowest mental health level youth, studies indicate that the likelihood of no youth needing medication in any given facility is relatively small. For instance, one study of youth in juvenile detention in Chicago found that two thirds of males had a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. The facility uses standardized screening instruments for mental health. One mental health staff member admitted that “very many” of the residents met the diagnostic criteria for depression, anxiety, attention-deficit, and other mental health disorders based on these instruments. JHA was told by several staff that youth are “rarely” prescribed medication.

In an interview with the psychiatrist JHA learned that typically youth in need of medication are assigned to other facilities. The facility psychiatrist described himself as “conservative” when it comes to medicating youth, but when a youth sent to IYC-Chicago is on medication, protocol is to continue the meds. We were also told that at times parents will refuse to give the facility consent to prescribe medications for depression and other disorders. Any treatment plan calling for medications or for a youth to be removed from medications, involves consultation reports with the school, therapists, and the security staff to assess the effectiveness of the treatment.

*Observations: The facility houses youth in the lowest categories of mental health needs and few if any are on psychotropic medications.*

*Recommendations: Continue to quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate mental health programs and adjust them accordingly. Remain open to prescribing medications where appropriate.*

## **Discipline**

IYC-Chicago has made a genuine effort to end the use of confinement except in extreme circumstances. The data supports that the facility has been successful in its efforts. No youth was confined in November or October. In all of 2010, confinement was used a total of 42 times for a total of 79 days, an average of 1.88 days per confinement. Administration stated that when confinement is used immediate action is taken to begin working towards the youth's release from confinement.

The most often used disciplinary practice, other than meeting with youth and discussing their behavior and ways to correct it, is the "blue jumpsuit." The blue jumpsuit must be ordered by a disciplinary hearing officer. When wearing the jumpsuit, youth are not allowed to work or participate in group activities. The youth still attend school and other programs, but are essentially kept from full social interaction. Youth in blue jumpsuits consult with counselors and therapists each day to discuss their issue and a plan to avoid future incidents. On average youth spend five days in the blue jumpsuit.

During our visit we spoke to one youth in a jumpsuit and one who had recently been given his privileges back. Both of these youth seemed to recognize that they had acted inappropriately and, though not happy with it, seemed to think that the punishment was not too severe. This program is a much more appropriate approach to the discipline of youth than confinement and keeps youth from being severely isolated. Administration stated that other facilities have shown an interest in the blue jumpsuit approach, and JHA would support all facilities using this alternative to confinement. IDJJ is in the process of exploring restorative justice practices as well. Currently no formal restorative justice programs are operating at IYC-Chicago.

*Observations: Confinement is becoming increasingly obsolete at IYC-Chicago. Instead, the facility is using more appropriate and humane practices for behavioral correction.*

*Recommendations: IDJJ should consider implementing the blue jumpsuit or similar programs at all facilities.*

## **Budgetary Issues**

The state suffers from budget shortages across the board; IDJJ and IYC-Chicago are no exception. The IDJJ budget has been cut another 10 percent this year and further cuts are not out of the question. Even those bills necessary for operation are not being paid on time by the state, resulting in serious problems for administration. For instance, during Thanksgiving IDJJ was forced to transport garbage from IYC-Chicago to IYC-St. Charles because the state was so behind in payment that the waste management company would not pick up the trash.

IYC-Chicago is unique to other facilities in that they lack food storage space and, therefore, must order food on a more regular basis. The state's failure to pay has led to some vendors refusing to deliver food to the facility.

The gym at the facility is in desperate need of rehab. The carpet in the gym is in total disrepair and presents a potential safety risk as youth could trip over the frays and holes. The mats used to pad the walls are falling apart and soon will be useless. The gym is particularly important at IYC-Chicago because youth have no access to outside recreational areas. The gym is the sole location for most youth to exercise.

Budget constraints also force the facility to rely heavily on volunteer programming. As former Superintendent Merritt put it “volunteers are the lifeblood of the facility.” Although JHA agrees that volunteer programming is a wonderful tool, the state must recognize that treating youth rather than warehousing them requires funding programs.

Expanding community based treatment and diversion programs for youth would save a great deal of money and reduce the number of incarcerated youth. Redeploy Illinois has proven the cost effectiveness of such programs. The savings gained could be invested in programs for the remaining incarcerated youth.

*Observations: Budget issues are affecting essential operations and preventing needed repairs and improvements.*

*Recommendations: Decrease the number of youth sent to facilities by expanding community treatment programs and incentives. Use the savings to fund more programming for the smaller number of youth remaining in the facilities.*

## **Volunteer Programs**

The facility has a wide array of volunteer programs available to the youth. The list of programs is too lengthy for the purposes of this report, but a few are described below.

The Safe Humane program provides youth the opportunity to work with dogs. The program is meant to reduce violence against animals, but also to teach the youth compassion and empathy through dog training. The program lasts 8 weeks and gives the youth the opportunity to visit the program’s facility. Approximately 15 youth participate in the program at any given time.

Story Catchers provides an introduction to the arts through theatre. Youth in the program participate in script writing, stage craft, and all other aspects of putting on a play. The program lasts six months and culminates in the youth performing their play for parents and staff. This program also operates at IYC-Warrenville.

IYC-Chicago also has a youth baseball team that participates in a tournament outside the facility. Staff members volunteer their personal time to coach and practice with the residents. The opportunity to leave the facility is particularly important at IYC-Chicago given the lack of access to the outdoors.

One Family One Child is a holistic mentoring program focused on counseling, building life skills, and community reintegration. This program is particularly unique as it continues to support the youth upon release. The phone number for One Family One Child is given to each youth upon release. Youth are encouraged to call anytime they need assistance or guidance. Administration stated that one youth who excelled in the program is having his college education paid for by a volunteer and another received a college scholarship from the program.

Other programs include religious counseling, current events discussion, tutoring, and substance abuse counseling.

*Observations: Volunteer programs provide many opportunities for the youth that would otherwise be unavailable.*

*Recommendations: Increase the number of youth participants in programs outside the facility. Continue to seek interactive volunteer programs.*

### **Youth's Access to the Outdoors and the Community**

As noted throughout this report, IYC-Chicago has no outdoor areas. Youth could spend 6 months in the facility and only see the world through the window in their room. Although several programs do allow youth to exit the facility, not all youth are included.

Administration has increased the number of community field trips this year, but they recognize that more are needed. Opportunities for community service field trips are also under consideration.

Given the location of IYC-Chicago and the lack of outdoor access, community interaction is particularly important. Additionally, most of the youth at the facility are very close to release, and community interaction would further help prepare them for reentry. Given the research indicating the substantial role that community involvement plays in youth rehabilitation, these trips should be given more priority in IDJJ's budget.

*Observations: Administration recognizes the importance of community field trips, particularly at IYC-Chicago.*

*Recommendations: Continue to seek more opportunities to get the youth outside of the facility, particularly for outdoor activities.*

### **Family Involvement and Visitation**

IYC-Chicago administration recognizes that family involvement is key to a youth successfully turning his life around. Because of this, the facility allows family visitation six hours on weekends and holidays and two hours on Thursday and Friday. In addition to family members, the facility allows "mentor"

visits; mentors may be any individual from the community that plays a significant role in the youth's life. Mentors must be approved by parents prior to visiting and are screened by the facility.

Parents are invited to monthly family meetings with staff and administration to discuss youths' progress in treatment and to explain transitional needs of the youth. The facility has also implemented a family contact log to track all contacts between staff and family. Staff members are encouraged to contact and work with families on all issues.

*Observations: Family involvement is being recognized as one of the most important practices in the facility.*

*Recommendations: Continue to explore new and effective ways to engage families in the youths' treatment.*

## **The Grievance Process**

The grievance process is explained to youth in the Orientation Handbook provided upon arrival at the facility. The youth are encouraged to first discuss their grievance with their Youth and Family Specialist. If youth are not satisfied with the outcome they can file a formal grievance on a form and drop it in grievance boxes which are located in each housing unit and the cafeteria. Each formal grievance is addressed by a grievance officer and a recommendation for resolution made to the Youth and Family Specialist. If the youth still feels the grievance has not been resolved an appeal will first be addressed by the grievance officer, if still not satisfied an appeal may be sent to the Administrative Review Board in Springfield.

JHA found that the grievance log for the facility had not been updated in several months. Obviously, this was a severe oversight that we were assured it would be remedied. Deputy Director Ron Smith recently created a Casework Supervisor position, the supervisor would be responsible for keeping the log current.

JHA has had discussions with IDJJ regarding implementation of an ombudsmen program to review grievances that youth feel have not been addressed or that youth are uncomfortable bringing to staff. Superintendent Wartowski indicated a desire for the facility to be a pilot site for this program and a desire to revamp the grievance process.

*Observations: Grievance materials and boxes are readily available to youth. The grievance log was not up to date.*

*Recommendations: Take steps to ensure that the grievance log is kept current. Implement an ombudsmen program or similar program to provide outside oversight of the grievance process and resolutions.*

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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.

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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