



JHA 2023 Annual Report

From ED Jennifer Vollen-Katz

Dear Friends and Allies,

JHA believes that seeing prisons for ourselves and hearing the voices of the people directly impacted by prison is the best way to fully understand problems and determine viable, necessary steps for change; we are the



only independent oversight organization going into Illinois prisons in order to do this. **Thank you to all of you – our volunteers, funders and donors, partners, interns, and champions – for supporting this work and enabling our mission. We could not do this without your help.**

On our visits we regularly observe and hear about poor living conditions, and see for ourselves the decrepit and decaying state of many of the state prisons. JHA has been increasing awareness of these inhumane conditions, and **has publicly stated that Illinois should shut prisons immediately** (more on pg. 8). Understaffing throughout IDOC is a huge problem, negatively impacting almost every aspect of prison life. We also continue to hear a lot of concerns around access to healthcare and mental health treatment, tension between those working and living inside prisons, and lack of out-of-cell time and access to programming opportunities. Many of these issues also affect our juvenile system; it is time to close the outdated, adult-style prisons youth are held in while in IDJJ custody. Closing Youth Centers is part of 2020's Transformation Plan which aims to increase the focus on rehabilitation and supporting youth in their communities rather than holding them in penal institutions.

In 2024, JHA will continue to prioritize efforts to close prisons, understand and seek solutions to the impact of understaffing in facilities, increase early release opportunities/mechanisms, improve quality of and access to communications and information in prison, better support youth, and shut juvenile facilities. We are also focused on increasing transparency and accountability, including creation of a correctional ombuds office over the adult prison system that serves individuals in custody and also performs system oversight.

We hope you will continue to partner with us on this work; together, we will make a difference for those who are incarcerated. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jennifer Vollen-Katz".

Who we are

In order to better communicate who we are, what we do, and what we believe in, in 2023 JHA worked to better articulate our mission, a vision statement, and set of guiding principles. Thank you to everyone who helped inform this work.

Our Mission Statement

JHA monitors prisons and advances independent oversight of carceral systems to promote humane treatment and increased transparency.

Our Vision Statement

As long as there are prisons, we aspire to have a system that is equitable, reduces harm, and respects people's humanity.

Our Guiding Principles

1. Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect regardless of legal status or any personal characteristic.
2. The inhumane living conditions and degrading treatment that people in prison experience are violations of civil, constitutional, and human rights.
3. Exposing the realities experienced by people in custody creates an opportunity to address suffering, alleviate harm, and create a better future.
4. To determine what change is needed and how best to achieve it, we must center the voices of people who have experienced incarceration.
5. We need to end reliance on the prison system to solve complex social issues that are made worse by mass incarceration, which is a result of endemic racism, poverty, and inequity.
6. Working to improve conditions inside carceral institutions and seeking to end reliance on incarceration are not mutually exclusive.
7. All public institutions require independent oversight to promote accountability, educate the public, and advance reform.

Prison Monitoring

JHA Staff and Volunteer Monitoring Visits



At the heart of JHA's mission is the belief that what people in our prisons experience is important and should matter to all of us. Going into prisons to observe conditions and talk to the people who are incarcerated and share what we see, hear, and learn with the public is critical for increased transparency and



for respecting the humanity of our fellow citizens. Facilities we visited (with links to subsequently published facility reports) included Big Muddy, Crossroads Adult Transitional Center (ATC), Danville, [Fox Valley ATC](#), Hill, [Illinois Youth Center \(IYC\) Chicago](#), [IYC St. Charles](#), [IYC Warrenville](#), Jacksonville, Joliet Treatment Center, Kane County Juvenile Detention Center, [Kewanee Life Skills Reentry Center](#), Lawrence, Lincoln, [Logan](#), North Lawndale ATC, Peoria ATC, Pinckneyville, Pontiac, Robinson, Southwestern Illinois, Taylorville, and Western. Additional reports we published in 2023 following 2022 visits included [Decatur](#) and [Stateville](#); we also published a [comprehensive review of all five IDJJ youth facilities](#). Stay tuned for reports coming out in 2024 including Pontiac, Western, and an evaluation of IDOC's Reentry Facilities.

Measuring the Quality of Prison Life: JHA's prison survey



Since late 2022, JHA has been fielding a modified [“Measuring the Quality of Prison Life” \(MQPL\) survey](#) in all IDOC prisons; **this gives us unique and critical information on Illinois’ prisons.** This anonymous, confidential survey was developed by leading practitioners at Cambridge University’s Prison Research Centre. Also used in Europe, NY, and PA, the MQPL survey aims to analyze experiences and relationships as well as to better measure prison culture. In Illinois, JHA is using the MQPL as a way to provide prison administrators and other stakeholders with greater understanding and a

By the numbers:

- **30** prison facilities surveyed
- **8,800+** surveys returned
- **32,000+** comments
- **32%** response rate

foundation for positive transformation. Our groundbreaking survey work will also pave the way for metrics that can be used to compare prisons throughout this country, which is another way to understand and change prison philosophy and practices.

[View results reports by prison on our website](#); coming soon is our system-wide survey dashboard, which is the result of an exciting partnership between JHA and

[Loyola University of Chicago Center for Criminal Justice](#). Also coming shortly: IDOC staff survey results. (Note: survey quotes below are from Graham and Menard.)

I Doubt this place or places like this will ever be changed, but I hope one day it does change.
But the best of lucky and GOD Bless.

I am thankful for this survey because there are a lot of things that the outside people should know about from someone that they will believe and not just go off of the internet or what's shown on T.V/news because it's not always the true story about what is happening behind these walls & gates.

Communications From & About Prisons



In addition to compiling feedback from people inside through the thousands of surveys received in 2023, JHA continues to **read, track, and respond to letters, calls, and emails** from incarcerated people, their loved ones, and concerned community members. This information is a vital part of our monitoring work, giving us both qualitative and quantitative information which allows us to spot trends, learn more about issues, and connect with those inside prison. It also enables us to ask questions,



By the numbers:
- **900+** letters
- **700+** calls/emails

seek more information, better monitor the implementation of policies and practices, and inform and engage stakeholders in system change. We regret that we are unable to respond personally to everyone due to overwhelming demand, but we do send out response letters to all acknowledging receipt of the communication and sharing brief updates on what we are hearing and doing. *(Note: Quotes, in order, are from people incarcerated in Pontiac, Taylorville, Pinckneyville)*

My biggest obstacle to my ability to get into a program is the space. In other words first come and first serve. The rest are put on the waiting list for a long time. Because space is limited and they dont have that many programs, so they stall. I hope for better change on providing more programs. Thats my reason for answering all your questions. Because with out programs. How do they expect us to rehabilitate?

I am in need of your help, I am trying to get a copy of the Administrative Directives for the IDoc grievance process. Our library states they do not have it.

I also wrote A Grievance But im scared to Drop it they Dont come Around with the Lockbox the tell us to give it to them but I Refuse I seen And Heard them Rip up people Grievances.

Advocacy Initiatives

Thanks to JHA's leadership, all youth in state custody will have their rights protected by the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman (OIJO).



JHA champions advocacy efforts that improve the lives and outcomes for people in prison, focusing on administrative and legislative changes to prison policies and operations, and decarceration and facility closure efforts. We believe every person should be treated with dignity and respect and as we fight for system change, we seek to reduce immediate harm inside our prisons. [Public Act 103-0397](#) expands the remit of the OIJO to cover not only youth housed in Illinois' 5 juvenile prisons (160+ youth) but also those in its now 15 county-run juvenile detention centers (400+ youth). **Protecting the rights of youth in custody and ensuring they have access to a trusted adult/office who can help them both understand and assert their rights and get assistance when needed is critical to the safety and well-being of this vulnerable population.** We are grateful to Gov. Pritzker for his support and recognition of the important work of the OIJO. We also thank [Sen. Karina Villa](#) and [Rep. Edgar Gonzalez Jr.](#) for their leadership on this legislation, and congratulate them once again on receiving **JHA's Legislator of the Year Awards**. The effective date of the new law is 2025, but there is work to do to ensure that the office gets an appropriate budget allocation to serve these 15 additional facilities. JHA is working with stakeholders to ensure that the necessary resources are made available in the next fiscal year budget.

As a part of our work publicizing the need for this ombuds expansion, JHA was honored to be asked to contribute on this topic to the June 20, 2023 issue of the *International Corrections & Prisons Association's External Prison Oversight* newsletter, which is focused on the unique needs and issues of juveniles who are detained and incarcerated. [Read our article here.](#)



Calling for the closure of state prisons and the transformation of our juvenile justice system



JHA continues to lead the call to close some of Illinois' most harmful adult and juvenile prisons. **It is time to shut down old prisons that are not fit for human habitation and to increase decarceration efforts in meaningful ways.** Not only are our state's older prisons decrepit, unsafe, and rapidly deteriorating, but [it will cost more than \\$2.5B to repair IDOC's prisons per an independent consultant's report](#). Illinois prisons are also impacted by high rates of staff vacancies, resulting in fewer opportunities for out-of-cell time for people who are incarcerated as well as a difficult working environment for correctional staff. Illinois has an opportunity NOW to close prisons due to IDJJ's and IDOC's low populations (30K) vs. capacity (43K). [Read our August statement on this topic here.](#)

In June, we published [a comprehensive review of IDJJ facilities and their transformation plan](#), calling for action. This report referred to the 21st Century Transformation Model announced by the Governor and IDJJ in July of 2020, which would shutter existing adult-style prisons and move to smaller, localized, more youth-friendly facilities; the timeline outlined anticipated an end date in late 2024. However, to date, all five existing Illinois Youth Centers remain open with no planned closures articulated. **JHA's report demonstrates that IDJJ has reached a point where the impact of further improvements is limited by the adult prison-style model of its system and facilities, negatively affecting youth in ways that are impossible to overcome. The report also calls for expediting the plan and closing IYCs immediately.**

Closing some of our most inhumane prisons can and should be done in the immediate. In addition, next steps in transforming our juvenile justice system must include moving away from the Illinois Youth Centers currently used to incarcerate youth. These remain priorities for 2024, and JHA will continue to press hard on these fronts.

Additional Illinois Highlights

PREA-related work: (1) [The Prison Rape Elimination Act, or PREA](#), requires regular audits of correctional facilities by trained and certified auditors to ensure compliance with PREA standards. This year, a trained and certified JHA staff member led a PREA audit of one of Illinois' juvenile detention facilities. This is important work we were pleased to undertake; people in custody must be kept safe. Conducting a PREA audit was important both for the facility and for JHA to better understand the statute, its implementation, and its effectiveness. This in turn will help JHA better evaluate the PREA policies and practices inside secure facilities and advocate for changes that will increase protections for vulnerable individuals and improve outcomes. (2) PREA also requires agencies to prove at least one way for people in custody to report sexual abuse or harassment to an independent outside entity that is able to receive and immediately forward reports to agency officials, allowing the person to remain anonymous on request; JHA serves as this entity for IDOC. In 2023, we received and handled 110+ such communications.



Continued support of free State ID provision to exiting citizens: In December, Jennifer Vollen-Katz joined Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, and SAFER Foundation's Sodiqa Williams at [the press conference outlining a new program to provide free State IDs to all people exiting Cook County Jail](#). Free State ID provision is something JHA has been pushing for for years; the lack of a State ID presents a true barrier to successful reentry. We are pleased to see this program begin at Cook County Jail, and continue to push IDOC and IDJJ to expand their State ID program to all people exiting their prisons.



Illinois, cont.



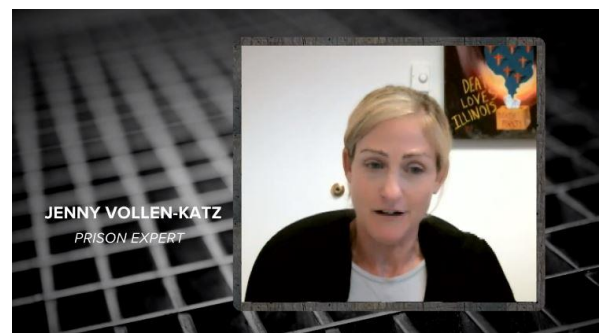
Correctional spending: As we do each year, JHA testified in front of Illinois Senate and House leaders about IDOC and IDJJ's proposed annual budgets. Appropriations hearings offer an opportunity to shed light on how resources are spent and on the many, many needs that require funding to be addressed, along with putting forward key recommendations for change. [Read our testimonies here.](#)

2023 Annual Award winners: System change takes all of us. In addition to our Legislators of the Year (pg. 7), we were thrilled to recognize the following partners for their outstanding contributions to furthering JHA's mission (click on links to watch their acceptance videos):

- **Commitment to Service Award:** [Frederic J. Artwick](#)
- **Dedication to Change Award:** [Ann Adams](#)
- **Journalist of the Year:** [Brandis Friedman, WTTW](#)
- **Partnership Award:** Exelon
- **Volunteer of the Year:** Shaneva McReynolds



JHA in the media: In 2023 JHA continued to be a leading source of information on Illinois prisons and system change for the press, both educating the public and informing policymakers. JHA was cited in articles both local and national; our expertise was also sought on prison-related topics in other states including Louisiana and Nebraska. [Find articles here.](#)



Illinois, cont.

JHA's Annual Event: In October, we welcomed [Louis L. Reed](#) as our keynote speaker. Louis (photo, left) talked about how his experience of nearly 14 years in federal prison has informed his social impact work today including that on the First Step Act. He was joined on stage by Johnny Page, ED of [Contextos](#), who performed an original spoken word piece about his experience with incarceration. [Thank you to our generous event supporters.](#) [If you missed our event, you can watch the recorded event here.](#)



NACOLE: JHA moderated a panel on juvenile correctional oversight at the [National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement's](#) annual event in Chicago in November. JHA also presented on Expanding Oversight with PREA in a December virtual training, and is part of the Jail and Prison Oversight Committee.



LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

Loyola University class: JHA ED Jennifer Vollen-Katz is pleased to be co-teaching her second class on Prison Reform with the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Center for Criminal Justice, at Loyola University of Chicago. This service-learning course combines classroom learning about mass incarceration and the realities of prisons with hands-on experiential learning, working with outside organizations and advocates in the prison reform space in Illinois to advance their efforts.

Our National Impact



PENNSYLVANIA & NEW YORK

In October 2023, JHA visited PA prison SCI Mahanoy with our partners at the [Pennsylvania Prison Society](#) and [Correctional Association of NY \(CANY\)](#). Our joint prison monitoring work allows us to compare/contrast oversight and inspection protocols and prison policies/practices, our organizational information gathering practices, interview techniques, and learn from each state's successful monitoring work. Our three organizations – the only ones of our kind in the USA – also work closely together on prison reform advocacy initiatives, our *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life* prison survey project (see pg. 5), and building the field of prison oversight nationally.



JHA, CANY and the Prison Society applauded the first steps of the Arizona Oversight Commission, and echoed the call for more resources to realize and sustain critical oversight. The Prison Society and JHA provided hands-on support to the commission during their monitoring visit to the Tucson State Prison Complex in October, attending and guiding the organization, implementation, and follow up for this visit. [Read more here.](#)



HAWAII

In March, JHA provided [legislative testimony](#) to support the budget request of the newly formed Hawaii Correctional System Oversight Commission – we are pleased to see oversight expanding to other states.

TEXAS & WASHINGTON D.C.

In March, JHA led a discussion group on prison monitoring at the University of Texas at Austin [Prison and Jail Innovation Lab](#)'s national conference; in June, we attended the [Correctional Leaders Association](#)'s annual conference in Washington D.C. to discuss staffing levels in prisons, an issue facing not only Illinois but correctional institutions nationwide.



Our Supporters

Thank you to everyone who has supported JHA this past year; your generosity, time, and donations make our work possible. More than 350 individuals and organizations made at least one gift last year. We would specifically like to recognize the following supporters for their 2023 partnership of the John Howard Association:

Arnold Ventures	John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Baskes Family Foundation	McGuffin Creative Group
The Baskin Family Foundation	Medline
Bluhm Family Charitable Foundation	Michael Reese Health Trust
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois	Mills Family Charitable Foundation
James B. & Jane R. Bradford Endowment	Project 1-11
Chicago Community Trust	Charles & M.R. Shapiro Foundation
Carylon, Julius & Marcie Hemmelstein Foundation	Tawani Foundation
Helen Brach Foundation	University of Chicago
Kadens Family Foundation	Women's Justice Institute



Get Involved

Illinois' criminal justice and prison systems impact the public safety and community health of all Illinois residents. It takes significant resources to fully understand and monitor these complex systems. JHA hopes that you will learn more about Illinois prisons and our justice system, help us fight for critical reform initiatives, and support our work. There are many ways to do this:

- [Contact us to report prison-related issues and concerns](#)
- [Sign up for our email list to receive our reports, statements, and event invitations](#)
- [Invite us to speak to your organization on issues related to prison reform](#)
- [Join JHA's Young Professionals Board](#)
- [Make a donation to JHA today to support our work](#)
- Media inquiry? Please contact ED Jennifer Vollen-Katz at jvollen@thejha.org.

Thank you for your interest in our work!