
**COVID-19 CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SAFETY OF
ILLINOIS PRISONERS AND PRISONS FROM JHA**

March 10, 2020

Prison health is problematic on a good day. In Illinois, ongoing litigation has both exposed and is working to remedy the unfortunate quality of and limited access to medical care available to people in our prisons. Court-appointed experts have submitted detailed reports pointing to the many inhumane and constitutionally violative practices around the medical care provided inside Illinois prisons.

With a highly contagious disease infecting people all over the world, there is understandable concern about the presence of the coronavirus in prisons and management of it once exposure has been realized. Having plans for prevention and treatment in place is critical to minimizing the impact of the virus. JHA believes that prison health is public health. Unfortunately, infectious disease outbreak underscores this truth. While prisoners are, in the most literal way possible, contained, there are many other people who are in and out of prisons regularly: staff, volunteers, delivery people, outside vendors, and visitors whose web of community contacts is just as wide as any person who does not enter a prison.

This means that Correctional Departments throughout our country must utilize preventative measures to promote health and deter the virus from entering and spreading through facilities. Correctional officials must put plans in place that are rigorous, well-resourced and capable of immediate execution. While Correctional Departments have protocols in place to address many emergency situations, carrying out these plans is always challenging for large government agencies. Further, correctional plans to address the coronavirus must be flexible enough to reflect evolving best medical and public health practices as information about the coronavirus continues to emerge. Taking such steps is critical to reduce exposure, mitigate harm, and provide care for any person who is infected or exposed to infection in a carceral setting.

The John Howard Association is an independent citizen correctional oversight organization. We go into Illinois' prisons to monitor the conditions of confinement and the treatment that people incarcerated in our facilities receive. We are the eyes and ears of the public inside this closed system, and bring the thoughts, ideas and lived realities of the incarcerated population out of prisons to be heard. JHA conducts surveys of people who are incarcerated in order to get input and perspectives from as many people as possible. Of the 12,780 people who responded to JHA surveys at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, 65% expressed dissatisfaction with medical care, and 78% of people reported they were dissatisfied with IDOC's provision of hygiene items.

We are not medical experts and do not offer specific advice on disease prevention and treatment. But as a prison watch dog and advocacy organization, we are concerned that the health of prisoners in the face of this new pandemic will not rank as a public health priority. The health and welfare of prisoners, like that of all people, must be considered and protected. This is not only the fair, humane thing to do; it also promotes the safety and welfare of everyone.

The following authorities have shared guidelines and recommendations for the prevention and handling of the coronavirus inside prisons:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/prevent-spread-in-long-term-care-facilities.html>

<https://www.ncchc.org/blog/covid-19-coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know-in-corrections>

https://www.ncchc.org/filebin/news/Coronavirus_one_pager_3.9.2020_national.pdf

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/03/06/pandemic/>

We urge the Illinois Department of Corrections and all criminal justice agencies that hold people in custody to have a plan in place, to be prepared to execute it with no delay and to make it publicly available. It is essential that the public have access to this information in order to be part of reducing exposure for everyone who lives and works inside our prisons

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For more information please see our website www.jha.org or call us at 312-291-9183.

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