
Facility Report



Monitoring Visit to Fox Valley Adult Transition Center 2023

Key Observations and Updates

Fox Valley Adult Transition Center is the sole IDOC female Adult Transition Center, which is similar to a work release facility, in Illinois. Its programming aims to prepare residents for reentry with an emphasis on work readiness. Fox Valley's program permits people to work in the community, and successful contract completion at Fox Valley may also result in programming sentencing credit for people who are statutorily eligible. People in custody must meet [several eligibility requirements](#) for work release placement, such as having less than 30 months left to serve and being classified as minimum security and low escape risk. Residents may also be at Fox Valley as a [permanent party](#), rather than a regular work release resident. Permanent parties work at the facility and are confined to the facility until their status is changed to work release. Administrators reported that seven individuals at Fox Valley were permanent parties in March 2023 during draft review for this report, with five working in the kitchen, one working as a peer tutor, and one working maintenance.



Satellite Image of Fox Valley ATC

Due to the relative freedom of movement and opportunity for sentence credits at work release centers, transfers to Fox Valley are highly sought-after by women incarcerated in IDOC. When JHA visited Fox Valley on January 10, 2023, it had a population of 73. The population at the time of the 2023 visit was a notable decrease from the facility's [average population](#) of 127 prior

to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a significant increase from the average population of 28 in early 2021. Administrators acknowledged the long waitlists for placement at Fox Valley and that the population was low compared to the facility's reported operational capacity of 128. They stated they were working with the IDOC women's prisons to increase transfer eligibility screenings. In December 2022, when JHA visited Logan (the prison where reception and classification is conducted for all women in IDOC), we were provided information showing significant counseling, records, and other staffing deficits that may be impeding eligibility screenings.

In draft report review in March 2023, IDOC administrators stated that there had been delays due to lack of medical and mental health staff for screenings, but that administrative placement criteria had changed and the number of people transferred to Fox Valley had notably increased after JHA's visit in January. They reported that they expect that Fox Valley will be near capacity by late spring. Additionally at this time, administrators stated that they had maintained a quarantine wing of 30 beds at Fox Valley (23%), which significantly reduced capacity. This practice seemed to be a holdover from the period of the pandemic when IDOC was not transferring people between facilities and there were higher COVID numbers. As of March, Fox Valley was reportedly permitted to decrease the reserved quarantine bedspace to five.

People housed in women's prisons in IDOC could be eligible for Fox Valley placement regardless of gender identity. At the time of the visit, Fox Valley housed one trans man and one trans woman. In draft review, in response to JHA's query about whether transgender women incarcerated in men's prisons could transfer, administrators stated that eligible people from all IDOC prisons may transfer to Fox Valley, not only those incarcerated at the women's prisons.

Fox Valley administrators acknowledged that IDOC could easily fill three to four Adult Transition Centers with all of those in custody who are eligible for transfer to work release from the women's prisons. **JHA continues to recommend that IDOC maximize the use of lower-security, more appropriate bedspace that provides access to more productive activity and rehabilitative opportunities.**

While administrators reported the average length of stay at Fox Valley was 18 months, they also acknowledged that some people have short stays of only a few weeks at Fox Valley, which is an inefficient use of the program. Additionally, administrators noted that they see a few instances per year of people returning to the program after being released. JHA was encouraged to see

that people with more serious convictions are being permitted to participate in work release at Fox Valley. Individuals who have served long sentences may benefit the most from reentry programming. Per information provided by administrators, 4.5% of Fox Valley's population of 75 in November 2022 had murder convictions and 18.7% had Class X convictions. In comparison, just 0.4% of the population of 126 had murder convictions and 9% had Class X convictions at the time of [JHA's 2018 visit](#) to Fox Valley. Administrators also stated that 3-4% of their population at the time of the 2023 visit had initial sentences of 20 to 30 years.

Fox Valley's building is leased and located in Aurora, Illinois. The rooms are "dorm-style" with 2-6 beds. Administrators stated that how many roommates a person has is generally determined by seniority, but that they try to keep some variation of length of stay of residents within rooms to allow for mentoring. Structural maintenance and repairs are handled by the property owner. Administrative staff did note some issues with plumbing, as well as laundry machines. They also acknowledged that the facility was not fully ADA compliant. The building is multistory and lacks an elevator. There is a library, a small gym, and a dining room that also functions as a visitation room. Most of Fox Valley is air-conditioned via use of window units. Staffing is minimal and there are no onsite healthcare staff. Administrators stated that most people go to the hospital across the street for their medical and mental health needs, and they have a partnership with a nearby dentist for dental services. However, if someone requires more care, they will be transferred to Logan.

As with many IDOC facilities, Fox Valley has been affected by staff shortages. There were seven security staff vacancies out of 25 (28%), including two shift supervisors. Administrative staff reported that counselors occasionally take the role of shift supervisors to compensate.

Work release residents at Fox Valley progress through four "levels," with each level expanding their freedom of movement. Individuals begin at Level 1, in which they complete a seven-day orientation and apply to jobs. During orientation, staff assist them with obtaining things they may need, such as their state ID and Medicaid. Individuals also complete mandatory work readiness classes and participate in mock interviews with peers. Residents then apply for a job and begin working, with staff driving them to work for the first month. When Fox Valley work release residents progress to Level 2, they are permitted to leave the prison independently to go to work. At Level 3, individuals may leave to go to certain pre-approved locations in the community, such as stores, restaurants, gyms, and salons based on a planned itinerary. They

also must complete 40 hours of community service before progressing to Level 4. At Level 4, residents may leave the prison to visit family. Administrative staff stated that individuals at Level 4 may visit family for 72 hours at a time, though women JHA spoke to said that their visits were 48 hours. Some of the women JHA spoke to felt that the 48-hour time constraint was unfair, as they had heard that men in ATCs were allowed the full 72 hours. In draft review, IDOC administrators clarified that they allowed home visits of up to 72 hours for individuals who had been on Level 4 for four months or more (considered “Honors Status,”) and that this was an incentive practice that was the same as the one for men at Peoria ATC.

JHA visited during the day when many residents were at their community work assignments; 25 women were reportedly onsite, which included all permanent party residents. Most individuals interviewed onsite had positive remarks about the work release program. Many women found the process for getting a job to be relatively straightforward. Two women said that they obtained employment within two weeks of arriving at Fox Valley. However, one woman was still job searching after two months at Fox Valley. Information provided by administrators states that the employment rate is “consistently 100%.” Those interviewed by JHA were generally positive about their community work assignments. For example, we spoke to one woman who worked as a dishwasher at a nearby Denny’s and said that the opportunity to work was *“a blessing.”* Another woman who worked at Denny’s said that two of her managers were previously Fox Valley residents, and she appreciated having managers who understood her circumstances. We also spoke to someone who said she was grateful for the opportunity to save money, because *“being able to get out and not be a burden to my family is huge.”*

Many of the women that JHA spoke with worked within walking distance of the facility, while others took the bus to work. Because residents are allowed to keep a cellphone in a locker outside of the secured area of the facility, they may also use Uber, but that can be expensive. Administrators shared that one resident requested hundreds of dollars a week from her account for Uber rides to work; staff reportedly encouraged her to take the bus or set up a carpool arrangement instead.

Fox Valley residents turn in their paychecks to the prison’s business manager, then request money back to cover necessary expenses. Information provided by administrators stated that the average amount saved upon release is \$10,000. In draft review, IDOC administrators stated that two residents since JHA’s visit have left Fox Valley with over \$40,000 in savings, nearly

double what the prior highest savings had been. A few women classified as permanent parties told JHA that they had tight budgets and currently had no surplus for savings. These women also said that permanent parties were previously allowed to hold a part-time job in addition to their work assignments, and they believed the prohibition on outside work was unfair. In draft review, administrators explained that permanent party residents must complete a six-month contract, during which they must be accompanied by staff or volunteers at all times outside the facility, and they can only progress to Level 2 with just outside “basic need movement” permitted, such as for medical appointments.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, much of Fox Valley’s activities are conducted by peer-led groups, as movement and volunteer programming were restricted. Some of the peer groups offered were meditation, crocheting, yoga, a civics class, “Power Hour” (a workout group), and Bible study. Those who are at least Level 2 could attend religious services in the community. Educational opportunities at Fox Valley appeared limited, though administrators stated that Fox Valley residents were permitted to take courses at the local community college. At the time of JHA’s visit, residents could take a forklift course offered by an outside group and pay a \$20 fee for a 3-year forklift certification from the county sheriff. Fox Valley also offers substance use disorder treatment classes and peer-led groups. Some of the women JHA spoke to expressed dissatisfaction with the substance use disorder treatment programming, stating that the class was often cancelled and the workbooks were over twenty years old. Administrators responded that they did not believe materials were that outdated. Further, a few women said that they were required to participate in treatment even if they did not have a history of substance abuse. They asserted that programming should be more individualized. Residents are drug tested after every family visit, upon reasonable suspicion, and at random.

At the time of JHA’s visit, no one at Fox Valley had COVID. Masks were required in all common areas, though JHA observed that many of the women and staff members did not mask properly or at all during our visit. Administrators stated that non-vaccinated individuals in custody and staff are tested for COVID each Friday, and temperatures are scanned each day. Those who test positive were moved to a separate wing of the ATC, then were transferred to Logan for a 10-day quarantine period due to the lack of onsite medical staff. In March draft review, administrators stressed this was per CDC, Illinois Department of Health congregate settings, and Agency Medical Director guidance. JHA spoke with someone who said she had been transferred to Logan for two weeks for COVID. Residents are reportedly transferred back to Fox

Valley upon the resolution of symptoms or a negative test result. Administrators stated that all residents who had to go to Logan due to COVID were able to resume working upon return.

People reported varied experiences with staff at Fox Valley. Some stated that there were some staff members who were helpful and treated them with respect, but others who were aggressive and too quick to give disciplinary tickets. One woman we spoke to said that while it was “a *privilege*” to be at Fox Valley, “*some [staff] have to lighten up on us. They have to be professional.*” Residents told JHA that tickets almost always result in sentence credit deductions, which can be distressing since deductions would postpone their anticipated release date. Revocation of good time over 30 days is reviewed by the Prisoner Review Board, unless a person is within 60 days of release, in which case IDOC can make the determination. However, there may have been some confusion about the difference between inability to earn expected sentencing credit under current contracts due to discipline and having sentencing credit already earned revoked for misconduct. There was a perception among some residents that favoritism, and potentially racism, determined whether or how someone would be disciplined for an infraction. A few women also voiced that there was little transparency on how Earned Discretionary Sentencing Credit (EDSC) days are awarded and under what circumstances they can be taken away. Use of discretionary sentencing credit is an ongoing source of confusion throughout IDOC.

In draft review, administrators stated that residents sign contracts, implying that residents therefore understand what the expectations of the program will be in order to successfully complete and to earn sentencing credit. One of these expectations reportedly relates to not incurring serious disciplinary tickets. They further stated that they do not take discipline and or sentence credit denial lightly, noting that one ticket may undo a 90-day contract. Administrators stated that minor tickets would not result in sentence credit denial for violations of contract terms, and that sentencing credit denials were limited to safety and security concerns. However, the given examples of safety and security concerns included things like residents consuming alcohol or having e-cigarettes at the facility. It seemed that in a work release or community setting, while the conduct may be rule-breaking and could potentially result in tickets that could void a contract, it is not necessarily “illegal,” and it did not necessarily seem like serious safety or security concern warranting delays in release. This is in contrast to the same conduct occurring in a prison, where it would involve other more serious issues like introduction of contraband. Therefore, sanctioning with loss of sentencing credit opportunity did seem

comparatively harsh. Administrators clarified that with e-cigarettes they do not know the substance involved and that revocation of good time already earned would be for more serious conduct.

Additionally, in draft review, administrators stated that a facility administrator would review every ticket and look for concerns such as favoritism. They stated that resident disciplinary reports and related data are reviewed by a committee of staff from various departments to analyze any trends, including disparate use of discipline. They noted that this data has helped address grievances from individuals who may have had a perception of potential favoritism or racism. **JHA again encourages IDOC to make more information regarding use of discipline, grievances, and sentencing credits public.**

Some women during the visit had also noted that counselors were not very knowledgeable about issues important to individuals in custody, and often did not help people apply for early-release opportunities, such as electronic detention. Fox Valley residents must be submitted for such opportunities by counselors at their parent facility, with the Fox Valley counselors acting as intermediaries. This process was perceived as inefficient and frustrating by some of the individuals who spoke with JHA. At the time of the visit, administrators acknowledged that counselors were behind on submitting people for these opportunities and attributed delays to staff shortages. In draft review, administrators stated that the clinical department is fully staffed and that counselors submit contracts quarterly with a tracking system in place to assure contracts are completed correctly and on time, which the supervisor monitors. They stated that contracts are sent to Logan and Decatur for final processing and sentence calculation and that contract requirements are explained to residents at intake, at every level, promotion, and as needed throughout their stay. Additionally, information is posted throughout the facility and is in handbooks. Administrators felt that communication of information was improving.

Administrators during the visit told JHA that they understood the value of taking a gender-responsive, trauma-informed approach at Fox Valley. For example, administrators said that they strongly discouraged residents from forming romantic relationships in the community because there are people who know that Fox Valley residents are a vulnerable population and may “prey” on them. Such relationships cannot be prohibited, however, and administrators stated that women have become pregnant or gotten married while at Fox Valley. They also said that staff advise individuals in custody that certain community job placements may be triggering; for

example, someone with a history of substance use disorder may not want to work at a store where they have to stock alcoholic beverages. Administrators stressed, however, that residents are “treated like adults” and ultimately decide what job placement is right for them.

Another change since prior JHA visits was that Fox Valley hired a Reentry Administrator, or Correctional Counselor 3, which is a new IDOC position. They explained that the purpose of the position was to provide those in custody with an individualized reentry plan, supplementing the work of counselors. Administrators also noted that Fox Valley became [ACA accredited](#) in January 2023 with 100% compliance, which is another newer initiative within IDOC. When asked about current projects for improving Fox Valley at the time of the visit, administrators stated that they hoped to expand programming, especially vocational opportunities, and that one of their long-term goals was to add a computer lab, although they noted that residents were able to access both vocational training and computers in the community. Filling staff vacancies was also a priority. Administrators further stated that Fox Valley had no security cameras, but some had been purchased. In March draft review, they reported that the cameras were scheduled for installation at the end of the month.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (331) 264-4081 or jvollen@thejha.org

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report concerns and issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff are reading every letter and tracking this information to monitor what is occurring behind prison walls and to advocate for humane policies and practices. Family and friends can contact JHA via our website www.thejha.org or by leaving us a voicemail at (312) 291-9183.

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 that are instrumental in improving prison conditions. JHA humbly thanks everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.

