
**Statement of the John Howard Association
on the Need to Address Under-Resourced, Under-Staffed,
and Inhumane Prisons in Illinois
May 9, 2022**

The John Howard Association (JHA) is a statewide, nonprofit, independent citizen correctional oversight organization. For over 120 years we have been going into Illinois prisons to monitor the conditions of confinement and treatment of the people who are incarcerated. We report our observations and findings and make recommendations for reform. We believe that people in prison should be treated with humanity and have their rights respected, and that in order to prepare people for future success we must dramatically change our criminal legal system and punishment framework. Understanding the current realities of our prisons, the experiences of the people who both live and work inside of them, and their thoughts on needed change are important to identifying issues as well as critical to reducing the harms caused by incarceration and charting a better path forward.

As Illinois realizes a meaningful decrease in the state prison population, there is opportunity to make meaningful changes. The current prison population stands at approximately 28,000 people, far below the almost 37,000 people in custody in March of 2020 and the total rated capacity for all of the facilities run by IDOC (which is just over 32,000). It is our understanding that amidst these changing numbers IDOC has undertaken two efforts: first, a plan to reorganize facilities (including a [specific plan for changes at Pontiac and Vandalia](#)), review classifications of people in custody in order to maximize program opportunities, and shut down the living units that are in the greatest state of physical disrepair and decrepitude; and second, the hiring of an independent consultant to assess all existing facilities and identify and document the infrastructure needs system-wide. Given a shrinking population, statewide IDOC staffing vacancies, old and decrepit prisons or living units that are not fit for human habitation, and lack of resources for programming and treatment, both short- and long-term plans for system reorganization and change must be made and should be shared publicly. The current situation allows for larger system changes, including continued reduction of incarceration, consolidation of resources, and closing of prisons that have the most inhumane living conditions and fewest program opportunities. Illinois should take advantage of this. JHA recognizes the value of an interim reorganization plan that more effectively utilizes limited resources, and importantly, immediately removes people from the most inhumane and dangerous living areas inside our prisons. Harm reduction is a necessary strategy to improve the day-to-day lives of the people who are currently in prison. Additionally, many people confined in inhumane conditions will soon be released and it is difficult to imagine how their ill-treatment could improve either their well-being or public safety or result in any cost-saving; in fact, we know it will be the opposite and that these environments also are detrimental to staff.

Pontiac Correctional Center (Pontiac) was opened in 1871, and like many prisons in Illinois, its deferred maintenance issues can be calculated not just in years but in decades, quarter, and half centuries. This means that much of the facility infrastructure is in extreme disrepair and both

living and working conditions are negatively impacted by poor ventilation and temperature control, leaking water fixtures and roofs, and concerns about the presence of mold to name but a few of the issues, as noted in [prior JHA reporting](#). Pontiac houses different incarcerated populations that pose complexity, including those who have been designated Seriously Mentally Ill, some needing Residential Treatment Unit level care, those who face extreme consequences such as long-term disciplinary isolation for their behavior in prison, and those who are stuck in Administrative Detention, a status that remains frustratingly ill-defined with the attachment of significant restrictions. While the facility works to come into compliance with agreements entered in the course of litigation, being inside the facility and witnessing the high levels of distress exhibited by some individuals in custody makes clear the need for increased staffing and treatment hours. Most critically, due to short staffing and not just COVID restrictions, people were not being provided with even the minimal out-of-cell time expected. On a recent visit to the facility, some people told us they were lucky to go outside once a week; staff explained that although staff posts required to run yards were prioritized, due to current staffing deficits they were still unable. These staffing problems must be examined and addressed.

IDOC's plan to reorganize and repurpose facilities includes closure of the living units in various prisons that are most in need of repair and with the most deferred maintenance, and seeks to make use of opportunities presented in different areas for programs, training, and care. It is important for IDOC to be transparent with the public about this plan and implementation progress. Given that the population throughout IDOC is down since the beginning of the pandemic, there is opportunity to make changes that remove people from the worst living conditions inside IDOC facilities and consolidate staffing resources. Staffing levels, including ability to recruit and retain staff in certain areas (including specialized staff) must be considered when determining where people should be housed going forward.

As of February 28, 2022, IDOC's [most recent quarterly data report](#) shows a total of 938 people incarcerated at Pontiac, with 151 of those people being housed in the medium security unit. [Two years prior](#), population was 1,174 with 391 in the MSU. During JHA's most recent May 2022 Pontiac visit, the MSU (known as the Farm) had been shut down due to reported issues with the heating system, leading to some individuals being sent to other prisons and some moved into a maximum-security living unit at Pontiac. Throughout the last few months some people who were classified as maximum security by IDOC have also been moved out of Pontiac to other facilities. During our recent visit we were informed that despite population changes, Pontiac is experiencing at least a 30% staffing deficit for both healthcare and security, making the current climate even more difficult for everyone.

According to IDOC [public reporting](#) in March 2022, Pontiac on paper had 774 staff (550 security staff, 149 non-security IDOC staff, and 75 non-IDOC staff) compared to 957 (721, 158, and 78) two years earlier. However, publicly reported data does not capture allocated positions, use of overtime, nor "boots on the ground" or the number of staff who are physically at work not counting those on leave, etc. While the population and staffing at Pontiac look to both be reduced about 20% over the past two years many of the aforementioned factors are not included in that percentage. It is also important to note that these numbers do not reflect that the remaining population at this facility is primarily higher need. Lack of staff significantly negatively impacts movement inside a facility, which leads to an existence that is locked down, with few opportunities to go to yard or engage in group programming. The more deprived people are of activities, treatment, necessary items, recreation, and opportunities to connect with loved ones

outside, the less they may feel they have to lose by exhibiting their frustration. This leads to all around negative outcomes, including making staff jobs more difficult and possibly dangerous. Staffing deficits in medical and mental health treatment further stress individuals and create a more difficult and dangerous environment for everyone. Policy change and litigation agreements in Illinois in the past several years acknowledge what has been well documented; that long term confined isolation is detrimental. It is therefore not surprising to hear reports that the current situation has led to increased violence or assaults or perceptions that more extreme behavior is necessary to get limited staff attention.

Ultimately, our ability to move to a system that respects human rights and dignity, focuses on rehabilitation and restoring people to useful citizenry, hinges on implementing an entirely different system of consequences that focuses on building people for success rather than tearing them down and traumatizing them through punishment. As our statewide prison population declines, closing facilities makes sense. Investing in front end diversion programs and deflecting people from the prison system should be prioritized; sinking money into antiquated facilities that cannot meet the needs or respect the rights of people who are in conflict with the law is wasteful and ineffective. Those who are not onboard with modernization of correctional practices will be left behind because we know the harms that our past practices have perpetrated. We have seen that funneling resources into prisons does not increase public safety, nor does it improve outcomes for those who are incarcerated. As the population shrinks, Illinois can and should close these facilities while determining feasible paths for new business and employment opportunities in the communities that house prisons and provide the necessary training and support to help people transition to new positions outside of corrections.

JHA will continue to monitor prisons in order to observe and report on the realities of life inside of them, put forward recommendations to reduce the harm caused by carceral environments, and advocate for micro and macro system change. While waiting for the release of the contracted for facility assessment plan scheduled to be shared this summer, it is critical that other mechanisms be stood up and strengthened to provide more protections for people inside and increase system transparency. Along with better conditions, treatment, medical and mental health care, more program and recreational opportunities, increased ability to communicate with loved ones, and access to information, both a functional and fair grievance system that tracks and publicly reports data as well as increased oversight and the existence of a statutorily mandated office of Ombuds are critically needed in IDOC. While JHA supports goals and efforts to fully reimagine and transform what the consequences meted out by our criminal legal system look like in Illinois and throughout the United States, we note the importance of and advocate for immediate harm reduction as we continue to fight for larger change.

For more information, please contact JHA at: www.thejha.org

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