
**Statement by the John Howard Association
on HB 3653, the SAFE-T Act, Becoming Law
February 22, 2021**

JHA is thrilled that the Governor signed House Bill (HB) 3653, omnibus criminal justice reform legislation, now known as the SAFE-T Act (Safety Accountability Fairness Equity Today) into law. There is more work to be done, but with the enactment of this law, Illinois takes an important step towards achieving a better system for our state -- one that prioritizes equity and fairness along with public safety and smart resource allocation.

JHA is Illinois' only independent citizen correctional oversight organization. Our work and mission are focused on increasing the transparency of our criminal justice system and shining a light on problems and unfairness in order to address issues and hold systems accountable. It is in identifying what we are doing wrong, exposing it, and advancing reforms to rectify these wrongs that we can begin to have a system that recognizes and respects the dignity and humanity of all people.

This legislation, in pieces, has been a long time in coming. Some key reforms ushered in by the SAFE-T Act include:

- Eliminating a wealth-based system of bail that penalizes the poor without improving public safety or justice system outcomes
- Reforming how police are trained, should behave on the job, and held accountable to performing their responsibilities with honesty and fairness
- Recognizing the need to increase publicly available information about the men and women who die while in the custody of criminal justice agencies without loved ones available
- Reducing unnecessary restrictions of liberty imposed upon criminal justice-involved people

These are not new ideas, conversations, or even legislative proposals in Illinois. It has taken years to recognize and respond to the urgent needs of people impacted by our criminal justice system that have too long been discussed but not addressed. Improved systems of policing, criminal legal processes, and correctional outcomes help our communities and make better use of limited resources and taxpayer funds. JHA believes that HB 3653 will lead to important system improvements. Included in the SAFE-T Act are two specific provisions that we championed: **the modernization of the Mandatory Supervised Release (MSR) statute and the establishment of the Death in Custody Reporting Act (DCRA).**

MSR

The length of MSR terms is currently dictated by a 40-year-old statute rather than by modern evidence-based best practices. Thus, Illinois' approach to supervising people released from prison is antiquated, expensive, and ineffective.

Approximately 24,000 people are on MSR today in Illinois. Yet evidence shows that subjecting people to unnecessary correctional supervision impedes successful reentry. IDOC wastes scarce resources unnecessarily supervising low-risk people, which leaves fewer resources for high-risk and high-need people leaving prison.

HB 3653 not only reduces the length of MSR for most people leaving prison, but it also protects public safety by empowering the Prisoner Review Board to impose a term of MSR for Class 3 and 4 felonies if a risk analysis shows it is necessary.

However, there is so much more to this bill. The SAFE-T Act addresses many criminal justice system issues ranging from law enforcement training and standards to arrest, bond, sentencing reform, prison data collection. **We must stand together to protect the people who are directly impacted by the system.** The unfairness and dysfunction that plague our prisons begins in communities and extends throughout social safety nets, support systems, and ultimately to our justice system. We work to fix pieces that impact people in prison every day, but we also join in pushing for change that begins outside of prison walls that will reduce the number of people who end up inside them.

We thank the legislators who courageously introduced and fought for this bill, as well as the Governor for his commitment to building a more equitable criminal justice system by signing this bill into law. We are all better when we are each better, which starts with systems that increase and improve conduct standards, recognize principles of fairness, and promote accountability.

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DCRA

Illinois and local jurisdictions do not adequately report information on deaths that occur while people are in the custody of our law enforcement agencies. This lack of transparency is troubling and needlessly erodes public trust in government.

DCRA requires that basic information be publicly reported about who, where, when, and other circumstances surrounding a death in custody. This information enables family members and other stakeholders to hold agencies accountable for the treatment of people in their custody, thus safeguarding the constitutional rights of Illinois residents.

Additionally, Illinois is not in compliance with federal reporting requirements for deaths occurring in custody. Noncompliance risks sacrificing up to 10% of our federal criminal justice funds.