

## **MEDIA ALERT - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE NOVEMBER 16th, 2022**

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### **Thursday, November 17th: Advocates for Incarcerated People Call for Fix to Broken Prison Water Systems in Illinois.**

**When:** Tomorrow, Thursday, November 17th 3:00p (CST)

**Where:** Virtual Zoom:

<https://nrdc-org.zoom.us/j/91359205801?pwd=bTRTMXQ0R09jL2xJNHZ5OUUwblVQT09&from=addon>

**Who:** Coalition to Decarcerate Illinois, Natural Resources Defense Council, John Howard Association, Equity Legal Services, Uptown People's Law Center, #JusticeforNick, Illinois Environmental Council, Clean Water Team Sierra Club IL Chapter

**What:** In the wake of yet another water emergency in Illinois prisons, this time stemming from a delayed hot water system repair at Stateville Correctional Center, a coalition of advocates for incarcerated people and environmental advocates today call on state agencies to uphold environmental justice and human rights by fixing the state prisons' broken water and sanitation systems once and for all and bring meaningful solutions to those currently affected by this negligence inside.

On or around October 20, Stateville Correctional Center experienced an outage of the second of its two boilers, [according](#) to the Illinois Department of Corrections ("IDOC"). The first boiler that comprises half of the facility's hot water system had been down since at least August due to mechanical failures and alleged delays in receiving needed parts. IDOC subsequently ordered the [emergency relocation](#) of nearly 400 incarcerated people, an extraordinary measure causing significant stress and disruption to those individuals as reported by a number of them to coalition members and outside advocates. Those moved could take only limited personal belongings and some reported not being able to take daily medicines like high blood pressure medicines with them.

People incarcerated at Illinois prisons have for decades raised concerns over a wide range of issues with drinking water and sanitation systems at prisons throughout the state's system, in particular at the oldest facilities like Pontiac, Menard, Vienna and Stateville Correctional Centers, as well as the Northern Reception and Classification Center. These issues include concerns over the safety of water generally; water that smells like sewage and/or chlorine; oily black particles in the water and on sinks/toilets;

health issues that clear up after prisoners switch to bottled water or stop showering in their living units; very limited and expensive supplies of bottled water for prisoners; lack of access to health and medical services to address health issues connected to the water; and dysfunctional toilets and showers that regularly back up into cells, along with extremely limited supply of toilets and showers for prisoners in some prisons.

In the last year, a new coalition of prisoners' rights and environmental advocates, including the Coalition to Decarcerate Illinois, Equity Legal Services, Illinois Environmental Council, John Howard Association, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Uptown People's Law Center, has come together to call for transparency around and comprehensive fixes for these ongoing water and sanitation issues – including the shutdown of facilities that do not warrant fixing. The drinking water issues identified to date include, but are not limited to:

- detection of Legionella bacteria at a dozen prisons since February 2022 and prisoner concerns that they are not being adequately screened for Legionnaires disease, after several confirmed cases of Legionnaires disease at the Pontiac Correctional Center in 2020;
- flow and water age issues and accompanying disinfection challenges, which pose heightened risk of contamination with bacteria and/or exposure to disinfection byproducts, which in turn are associated with increased cancer risk;
- lead and copper levels measured at staff and public areas of Stateville Correctional Center that exceeded federal action levels in 2021, as well as copper exceedances dating back several years and historic lead exceedances at other facilities;
- algae and cyanotoxin issues at the Vienna Correctional Center, along with poor condition of the Vienna water system more generally;
- very limited access to bottled or bagged water, including when prisoners are told by prison officials not to drink the tap water; and
- overall lack of transparency regarding environmental assessments of the prisons' water systems, especially in response to questions from and concerns raised by incarcerated individuals.

Members of the coalition have individually and collectively called on Governor Pritzker, Director Rob Jefferys and various other IDOC officials, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), IEPA and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) to daylight and solve the water and sanitation issues once and for all, including through a full vetting of the water systems as part of the state's capital review process. To date, state agency responses to these asks have been limited and emergencies like the hot water system breakdown at Stateville and Legionella detections continue. Staffing issues that

impede routine system maintenance and timely repairs, along with continued deferral of resources needed to fully inspect and repair or replace physical plant infrastructure, add to emergent situations like that at Stateville. The result is detrimental to the impacted individuals as well as the entirety of the State of Illinois that bears the moral and financial costs of this inattention and dysfunction.

**Why:** “We, as a coalition of the most directly impacted individuals by the IDOC, demand that the state of Illinois create humane conditions for those who remain incarcerated and handle this situation with the urgency that is required of a health crisis. Everyone has a right to safe, clean and sufficient water and sanitation — a right that does not end at the prison wall. [David Moran, Organizer, Coalition to Decarcerate Illinois]

“The rights to safe and sufficient drinking water and sanitation are human rights that do not stop at the prison walls. IDOC, IDPH and our environmental agencies must ensure that Illinois prisoners have continuous access to water and sanitation that meets all federal and state standards, and otherwise ensure access to water and sanitation that protects their health instead of harming it.” [Meleah Geertsma, Dir. of Environmental Justice Policy, Natural Resources Defense Council]

“For too long, IDOC has treated water systems in prisons as they do many other aspects of cell blocks – with at most a patch-on-failure approach that results in unlivable conditions for prisoners,” said Alan Mills, Executive Director of Uptown People’s Law Center. “This refusal to invest in truly fixing conditions faced by prisoners not only has a range of negative impacts on the prisoners themselves, but costs IDOC and the State unnecessary money, time, and headache when avoidable emergencies like the one at Stateville occur.”

“The unacceptable state of Stateville’s water system was laid bare by the failures of both hot water systems this past month. These failures are only emblematic of the overall aging and deteriorated condition of the drinking water and sanitation systems in many of the state’s prisons, which prisoners have been flagging for years,” stated Jennifer Vollen-Katz, Executive Dir. of the John Howard Association. “It’s time to put an end to exposing people in prison to unsafe water and invest in fixing water and sanitation systems or shut down prisons that don’t warrant the investment.”

**The coalition will hold a public virtual press roundtable TOMORROW, Thursday, November 17 to further discuss prison water and sanitation issues and asks. We encourage everyone to [review the following material highlighting various incidents stated above.](#)**

In solidarity,  
The People