
COVID-19 AND PRISONS: IMPORTANCE OF RELEASING PEOPLE, COMMUNICATION AND HUMANE TREATMENT

John Howard Association and many other stakeholders have been advocating for the immediate release of people in custody. There are many people especially vulnerable in prison under crowded, under-resourced conditions who can be successful upon release including those who are elderly, pregnant, and/or terminally or chronically ill. People who have been successful while living at an Adult Transition Center and people who have learned valuable re-entry skills and successfully completed programming at Life Skills Re-entry Centers should also be released. Additionally, people who are close to their release dates and those who are eligible for earned discretionary sentencing credits along with other categories of people including (but not limited to) those with low level offenses can be safely let out of prison through a variety of release mechanisms available to the Governor. Releasing people is a public health necessity for them, for the people who work in prisons, and for their families and communities. **We are all healthier if we are each healthier** – that is the principle behind so many of the social distancing and sheltering-in-place protocols we are now living under.

A major hurdle for release of some people is a place to live. Stakeholders are being creative and innovative in finding places for those who do not have a home to go to, but more places are needed immediately. JHA challenges all housing providers, including universities with currently vacant student housing, rehabilitative and other residential treatment programs, and any other group with space for returning citizens to stay to be equally creative and contact IDOC directly with information about their space availability.

JHA urges the Governor to accept imperfect and incomplete release plans at this time. Under the best of circumstances Illinois struggles to provide robust re-entry planning for people leaving IDOC. While there is a commitment to changing this, the reality is that Illinois cannot yet offer ideal re-entry services.

This is why JHA is advising that health and wellness be prioritized over conditions of supervision. Public health is better served outside of a correctional institution, and many typical conditions of supervision, such as access to treatment and other important programs and services may be inaccessible at this time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this time where information is constantly changing and not always readily available, we know how concerned the families and loved ones of the people in Illinois' prisons are. JHA may not be able to get you all the information you seek, but we are listening, tracking the issues, and advocating for better care for your loved ones.

Thank you to everyone who has called and emailed JHA with your questions and updates. We recognize that you've asked important questions that do not yet have satisfying or concrete answers.

Below are the most common questions we've received, followed by our responses based on currently available information:

Question: *What's the best way to request your loved one get released early due to the coronavirus?*

Many stakeholders are advocating for the release of multiple categories of people who are incarcerated. We know that IDOC is recommending releases and the Governor is making decisions about who leaves. This is happening slowly. We encourage you to petition the Governor's office, contact your elected officials, and support the work advocates are doing on the ground to secure release for as many people as possible.



Question: *If you aren't able to contact your loved one in IDOC, what's the best way to get an update about how people are doing at that particular facility?*

IDOC has set up a COVID-19 hotline you can contact at (217)558-2200 ext. 7700 or email questions to at doc.covid@illinois.gov. We also suggest you try calling the facility and speaking with your loved one's counselor or the Warden's office. You can also try contacting Springfield if you can't get a response.

If you haven't already, you could have your loved one fill out a medical information release form as a proactive measure, which can be downloaded on the IDOC website: <https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/Offender/Pages/Information%20Release%20Forms.aspx>. You can mail the form to your loved one and ask him/her to complete it.

Advocates are tracking information as we learn it and there are discussions on the internet in various forums which might be the most up-to-date information available out there if you cannot speak to someone at the facility. Remember people at the facility are going to be busy managing the situation and movement is restricted, so depending where someone is, this might affect access to various forms of communication.



Question: *If Coronavirus breaks out, what is IDOC's plan for hospitalization and ventilators?*

JHA continues to encourage IDOC's collaboration with state and local health authorities. As resources are scarce for everyone these plans are still being worked out. We will continue to request information about planning be made public.



Question: *What can be done to ensure a loved one in prison is getting necessary medical treatment?*

Frustratingly, this is tied to communication access. We know that movement is restricted so depending where someone is this will affect access to various forms of communication available. Communicate with your loved one to the extent possible, reach out to IDOC facilities and officials, and document issues. As mentioned above, you should make sure you have a medical release form executed so IDOC staff can communicate with you. You can also contact plaintiffs' attorneys (Uptown People's Law Center, <https://www.uplcchicago.org/what-we-do/prison/covid-survey.html>) in the *Lippert* healthcare class action settlement so that they have your information recorded and the court-appointed monitor may be able to look into it.



Updates from Families and Loved Ones: In addition to questions, we've also received real-time updates from those of you in communication with your loved ones. What we're hearing is many universal concerns – which JHA shares – about enough hygiene and cleaning supplies, keeping facilities sanitary, accommodating healthcare recommendations such as social distancing as well as addressing underlying health care concerns, providing enough opportunities for free phone calls and video visits, and the quality of medical care people in IDOC custody are receiving presently and what it will look like with the virus in the facilities.

The following information and concerns were shared with JHA during the first week of monitoring COVID-19 updates, reporting on 14+ facilities of all classifications:

Please note: JHA is not able to substantiate the information shared by loved ones. We have consolidated information we have received by email, phone calls, and other messaging services and share it as an anecdotal resource.

EARLY RELEASE: We urge the Governor to release as many people from prison as possible in order to limit exposure and contagion and save lives. Not only are prisons ripe for contagion, but resources can be used more efficiently to the benefit of everyone by reducing the prison population immediately.

- Women from the Moms and Babies program at Decatur have been released.
- Other loved ones want to be sure that those with young children at home also be considered similarly to those who had their babies with them in the institution.
- Similarly, many incarcerated people may on the outside be caretakers for aged or vulnerable relatives.
- Children of elderly and infirmed incarcerated loved ones are particularly concerned about these prisoners' exposure and treatment and are advocating for their loved ones to be released to home early.



LOCKDOWN & QUARANTINE: This information is changing rapidly and reflects information we have received in the past week, some of which may still be accurate, some of which may have changed.

- At one minimum-security facility, people were confined to rooms, but let out to use the bathroom, and by room to use the showers and phone.
- We are hearing that staff and people incarcerated are getting their temperatures checked and that people with symptoms are being isolated or areas quarantined.
- Issues with access to showers and showers being cold at some facilities continue. People's access typically varies by location and security level but will continue to be subject to changes as responsive measures increase controlled movement.
- Some people report that while transfers between facilities seem to have stopped from what they can tell, people are still subject to celling changes which make them uncomfortable given the exposure to someone new and the difficulty with social distancing. Increased need for attention to cleaning, hygiene, and medical needs are heightened given these realities, and all movement and exposure to different people should now be minimized to situations of necessity.
- We've heard that due to administrative quarantine measures, people are not getting outside from housing units. JHA recommends that efforts be made to get people outside into fresh air.
- Last week while people were still going to dietary for meals it was reported that some staff shifts were conscientious about separating people while others were not. This practice should be enforced consistently.
- Groups are now being conducted with less than ten people. For example, it was reported from one facility that church was conducted with only 9 prisoners and the chaplain present.

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- At a few facilities we heard that food portions are reduced, and they appear to be rationing the meals.
 - At another facility, we heard the law library is closed and individuals do not have access to needed case law or IDOC rules.



COMMUNICATION: IDOC must devote staff to ensuring review and approval of messaging and video visitors, must make sure mailrooms catch up, and must facilitate phone list approval and purging issues to improve communications during this time when visitation is restricted.

- We are hearing that Securus has still not resolved prior phone list approval or PIN number issues at certain facilities, which is of increased concern now that visits have been suspended.
- Phone availability and time out of cell compared to demand for phones in some locations still prohibits some people from accessing phones. Some people report that their access to phones has been limited by COVID-19 response measures.
- We continue to hear about GTL WIFI service or other issues with functionality for GTL tablets, video visits, and legal kiosks being problematic at several facilities.
- We have received many recent reports from multiple facilities that approval of GTL emails is taking several days.
- We heard about problems with outgoing mail at one facility.
- We are hearing concerns from family members about lack of contact with loved ones and that facility isn't providing updates.
- At some facilities staff have reported refocused efforts on getting communications issues worked out, as recommended.



SANITATION AND ACCESS TO HYGIENE/CLEANING PRODUCTS: Each facility's commissary within IDOC will likely have differences based on supplies available and other factors such schedules, quarantines, staffing, etc.

- People continue to express concerns regarding access to adequate and clean clothing and bedding.
- Some loved ones reported they've been told that full commissary orders are not being fulfilled, though they are being charged. People should be able to get money credited back when this is reported.
- At other facilities people report having limited commissary and that they are not able to get, or the commissaries are out of, hand sanitizer and other cleaning products. But, at one facility, people were reportedly allowed to double shop.
- Some people worried that their loved ones had had their monthly shopping opportunity prior to the news regarding restrictions and were unable to purchase things they would now need.

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- Encouragingly, we have heard some reports of more cleaning products being made available at some facilities, e.g. bleach-based cleaner is supplied to clean the phones and cells. However, we continue to receive serious concerns about lack of cleaning supplies and low levels of sanitation from various facilities, such as lack of cleaning materials and soap.
 - Some facilities and areas are serving all three meals in the cells, and this only adds to concerns about people being provided essentials to maintain cleanliness in an area that they are reportedly unable to properly clean.



MEDICAL CARE: Testing for COVID-19 within IDOC has only just begun as there have been widespread shortages of tests. IDOC will begin testing people with symptoms as is done in the community. Results may take several days up to a week to obtain. Test results by facility are available on the IDOC website

<https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/facilities/Pages/Covid19Response.aspx>.

- We continue to hear concerns from people that their loved ones are not receiving medical care for non-COVID-19 related issues.
- We've heard from several people who are concerned about loved ones who have underlying medical conditions or are older, making them more vulnerable.



We recommend people reach out for information from IDOC. They are providing updates on their Facebook page and have a dedicated COVID-19 response phone line (217) 558-2200 ext. 7700 and email doc.covid@illinois.gov. We caution not to expect proactive updates on individuals from the facilities given the number of people housed there. DOC has begun sharing FAQs on their COVID-19 response page

<https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/facilities/Pages/Covid19Response.aspx>. JHA recommends increased reporting and tracking of questions and information in order to provide the public with as much up-to-date information as is possible.

We encourage you to share your experience with these methods of contacting IDOC with us so that we know how your communication with IDOC is going. You can share your information, experiences and questions by leaving us a voicemail message at (312) 291-9183 ext. 208 or completing our online form at: <https://www.thejha.org/take-action?sectionscrollto=section-contact-us>.

We will continue to share information we receive and hope you will stay in touch with us.