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**Facility Report**



# **Monitoring Visit to Western Correctional Center 2023**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA) conducted a monitoring visit of Western Illinois Correctional Center (Western) located in Mt. Sterling, Illinois on June 20, 2023. JHA's prior monitoring visit to Western was on March 5, 2020, shortly before the initial COVID-19 pandemic visit restrictions. Western is a medium-security male prison within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), which housed approximately 1,700 people at the time of the visit.



Prior to the visit, JHA conducted a modified shortened Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) survey at Western and throughout IDOC. We received responses from 648 people housed at Western and seven housed at its satellite work camp. This response represented a nearly 40% response rate from the static Western population. JHA also offered a Staff Quality of Life (SQL) survey online to staff working in IDOC, and received responses from 17 staff who reported they worked at Western. Some survey quotes<sup>1</sup> and results are used throughout this report and will also be separately [reported](#). Generally, the surveys ask people to rate their agreement with statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and ask additional open-

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from people in custody survey comments are in **red** text and staff survey comments are in **green** text.

ended questions regarding positive and negatives at the prisons, as well as for suggestions for improvements.

As JHA completes our survey analysis we will be able to better compare IDOC prisons' results; however, Western appeared to have some of the most negative and concerning responses and MQPL scores, meriting serious review and response. In particular this prison continued to have significant unease regarding racism and lack of staff accountability. **72% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents did not think it was a humane prison; 74% did not think it was better than the prior year.** Nonetheless, many of the issues raised, including concerns regarding staff conduct, staffing, lack of movement, inability to transfer, drugs, harsh disciplinary practices, inadequate healthcare, lack of productive activity, access to outside supports, conditions, and problems with dietary and other necessities, were commonly reported across IDOC prisons during the same period. Excessive time in cell and resulting issues, coupled with lack of mental health care, continued to be major concerns. JHA was encouraged by IDOC's leadership's desire to bring more productive opportunity to Western and their willingness to engage in dialogue regarding some of these topics during our visit, in response to visit follow-up, and in other forums.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> JHA provided initial visit feedback in July 2023 and received some responses from administrators in August; a draft of this report was provided to IDOC December 5, 2023. JHA conducted an initial draft review of this report with IDOC on January 10, 2024, after which time we were repeatedly told a formal written response would follow. Despite repeated conversations about the status of this report and JHA informing IDOC that we would publish the report in early May, as of May 6, 2024 a written response had not been provided and IDOC declined JHA's offers to conduct another review meeting.

# KEY OBSERVATIONS

1. Larry Earvin's 2018 death at Western and the subsequent March 2023 [sentencing](#) of three former staff was a strong influence on climate at the prison. Many people expressed concerns regarding racism, or a desire for greater staff accountability.
2. Staff professionalism issues in general – as well as fear regarding possible retaliation – were again common, overshadowing other impressions. 84% of Western MQPL survey respondents disagreed with the statement that relationships between staff and incarcerated people were good.
3. Staffing problems were reported and limited input from staff surveys also reflected resourcing and morale issues. At the time of the visit, court and medical writs were reportedly taking significant numbers of staff from other posts resulting in more restrictions for people.
4. Throughout 2023 – at Western and other prisons in IDOC – incarcerated people continued to have limited movement and experience increased use of lockdowns, at times attributed to staffing issues. 59% of 2023 survey respondents at Western reported that they were in cells 22 or more hours a day. 91% agreed incarcerated people spent too long locked in cells.
5. Only a third of healthcare contractor [Wexford](#) positions were filled at Western. Vacancies exceeding 50% and prisons lacking critical providers has been a chronic issue in IDOC. Mental health staffing was particularly poor at Western, with one licensed provider potentially serving 1,700 people. JHA observed similar and even worse mental health staffing at the time of other monitoring visits of some other IDOC prisons in 2023.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

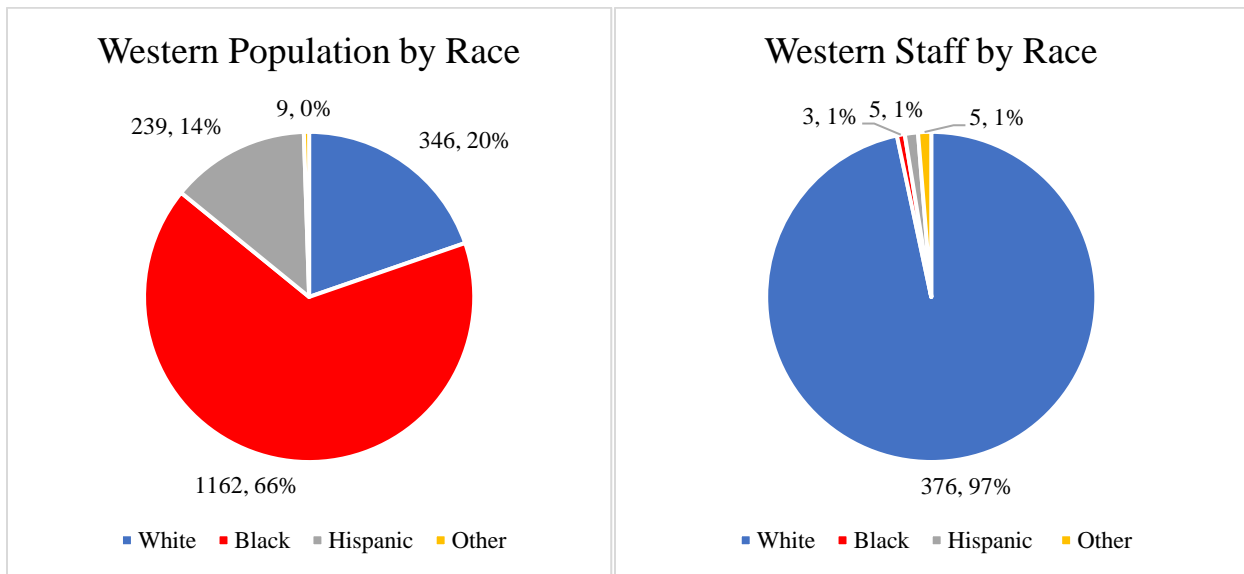
1. While transparency has increased since the passage of the Illinois 2021 Reporting of [Deaths in Custody](#) Act, it is important that people in prison and their loved ones have access to timely information from IDOC regarding deaths. Corrective actions must be implemented and should be made public to the greatest extent possible.
2. People should document and report specific concerns regarding staff conduct internally and externally to ensure that they can be properly investigated. This will in part entail implementing a more functional and transparent IDOC grievance system. JHA also continues to recommend IDOC make public more information regarding use of [staff discipline](#) and that Illinois create a Corrections Ombudsman to increase accountability.
3. Given the [2023 infrastructure report](#) demonstrating physical plant needs and anticipated bedspace excess, IDOC must plan for where people can be best housed, including staffing considerations. At \$77.7 million+, Western's deferred maintenance issues were not as substantial as at some IDOC prisons, but physical plant concerns were not uncommon at the 34-year-old prison.
4. JHA continues to recommend establishing updated expectations for out-of-cell time for IDOC prisons and creating new staffing plans to support this prioritization.
5. Individuals in custody, outside supports, and IDOC staff should document issues with inadequate healthcare provision and elevate and make public such concerns to support contractor and governmental accountability for provision of care.

# POPULATION & STAFFING

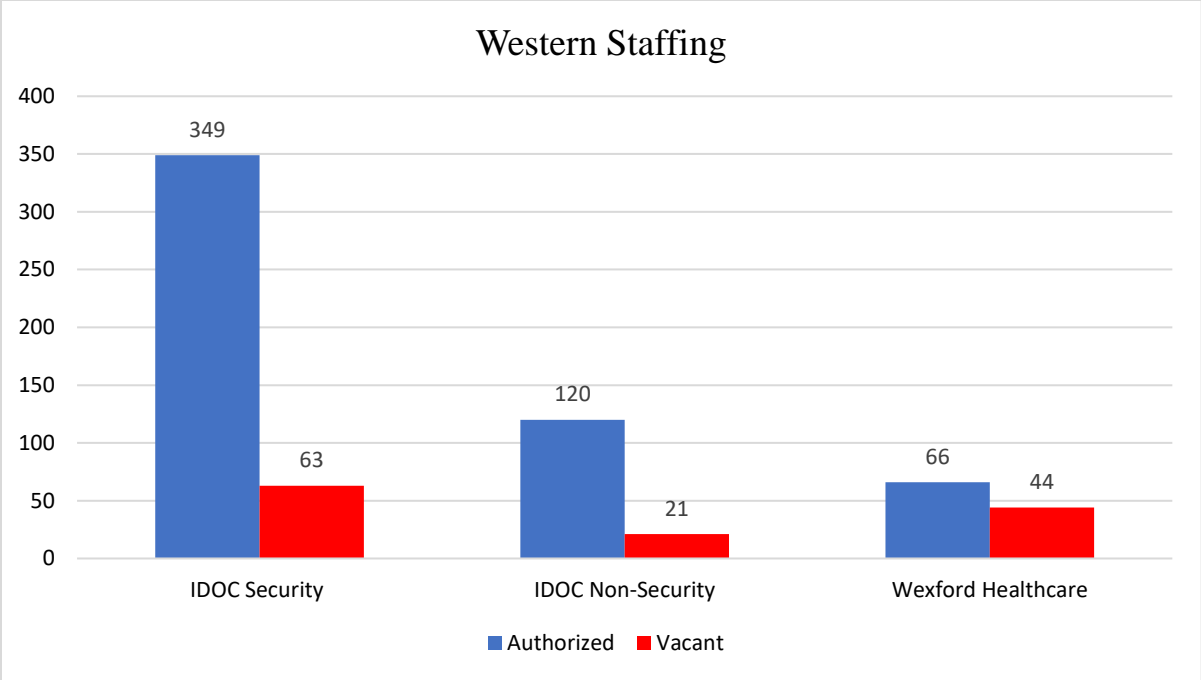
## Western

Western's population experienced a high approaching 2,200 people in 2013 and a low of nearly 1,000 fewer incarcerated people in late 2018, when transfers into Western appear to have been largely restricted, driving population reduction at that time. Since then, population has increased from a low of around 1,300 people to current levels around 1,700, with a dip to about 1,500 due to COVID between March 2020 and December 2021. Other population datapoints at the prison can be explored using [JHA's data tools](#) and are publicly available on IDOC's [webpage](#), e.g., in Quarterly and Operation & Management Reports.

### June 2023







## Clayton Work Camp

Western is the parent facility of the Clayton Work Camp, which is about a 20-minute drive from Western. At the time of the visit, it housed about 50 people with a reported capacity for 150. Given the staffing deficits at Western, utilizing this camp did not seem like the best use of resources, although JHA generally supports prioritization of use of lower security bedspace as it usually maximizes movement, opportunity for productive activity, and sentence credit. While the number of MQPL survey responses from Clayton was limited (7), some people [commented](#) about maintenance needs (noted in the [infrastructure report](#) at an estimated \$7 million in deferred maintenance for the work camp), while others reported lack of schooling and programs there, sentencing credit issues. There were also some expressed concerns regarding staff attitudes.

# DEATHS IN CUSTODY

*You would think an inmate being killed might affect the atmosphere here. But it and the 3 former C/O's convicted are largely covered up. ... nothing is going to change at Western if we as inmates here keep getting met with inaction from the outside. Public exposure would go a long way toward making actual improvements.*

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JHA's [2017 monitoring report](#) on Western stated that people in custody reported issues of staff racism, including discriminatory treatment and use of racist language, lack of staff diversity, fear of retaliation, and “*distrust of staff professionalism and disbelief in a rehabilitative non-punitive facility culture.*” People told us that assaults by staff occurred in areas without cameras. We wrote, “*Although JHA visitors felt that some staff and agency leadership acknowledged staff conduct issues at Western, at the time of the visit, it was not clear what was being done at the facility to resource and help support the creation of a healthier culture... there was definitely a need for greater accountability. ... JHA ... continues to urge increased camera capacity at IDOC facilities and holding staff responsible for misdeeds.*”

In 2023, many MQPL survey comments from people incarcerated at Western in describing negatives at the prison referred directly to the 2018 beating death by White staff of Larry Earvin, a 65-year-old Black man. At times it was difficult to distinguish people's comments regarding past staff misconduct and lack of accountability from those relating to current danger. Reports of staff misconduct and racism are not unique to this prison within IDOC; however, the 2023 sentencing of former Western staff and media attention were unusual, and historically this has been a prison with serious concerns reported.

*staff is all white men and woman their overly aggressive and threatening towards inmates even killing and assaulting multiple inmates.*

*This place Western IL Corr is not some where you come to change. It seems like the longer you are here the more hate you gain for people. They killed a man here a inmate in they Joke about the COs [Correctional Officers] think its Funny that they killed a Inmate that's sick.*

*The problems here at this prison have been made aware to Springfield and they have ignored them. Even when the staff murdered an inmate and collectively covered it up. Some of the same staff caught lying to authorities still work here so Springfield is as much the problem here as the staff culture. Either they are the solution or they are the problem! There is no other choice!*

*The unprofessionalism of staff, their need to always agitate, irritate & humiliate inmates. They've murdered 6 people, got convicted for one out six Officers that lied to protect own are Free w/No cases & all got raises. Meanwhile grievances go unheard.*

*Staff treat us like less then animals ([STAFF NAME REDACTED]) in this house But its a culture Here. they've killed people here. now they Just treat all of us Like crap cause we dont want to do or say something to get us killed too.*

People incarcerated at Western in 2023 noted that staff who may have been involved in the 2018 incident, subsequent cover-up, or whom they believed to be otherwise associated with the three men prosecuted, still worked at the prison. Some people reported staff “joked” or were disrespectful about the death or threatened that something similar could happen again. A few people commented that there may be other undocumented or prosecuted instances of deaths implicating staff misconduct.

In 2023, 88% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they did not trust the officers and 61% disagreed that to the prison was safe for incarcerated people. In JHA’s Western [2019 and 2017 surveys](#), 57.2% and 58% disagreed that the prison was safe, respectively.

While the level of fear and distrust at Western remained high, there had been some reported improvements in camera coverage. The 2019 Western [PREA audit report](#) states, “The facility has an extensive video and visual monitoring system in place. ... A total of 64 dome cameras, 10 outside cameras, and 5 DVR’s have been added during the past 12 months. ... The facility has asked for an additional 74 cameras to enhance visual/video monitoring.” While JHA cannot

independently assess the current adequacy or functionality of the camera system, including camera positioning or reviews, this appears to be some concrete positive change.

In 2023 MQPL survey comments several people further expressed desire for staff to have body cameras as a possible improvement, e.g., *“Personal body cams on COs [Correctional Officers] To show how we are treated. Either change the staff in whole They hold it against us because of the dam killing and their brother going to prison this is what I have seen in my [REDACTED] years here It has not gotten any Better. ... Close it down etc.”* Use of body cameras is becoming increasingly common in law enforcement, including in prisons, and such initiatives are [supported](#) by some corrections practitioners. Expanded, appropriate use of cameras provides the benefit of increasing transparency.

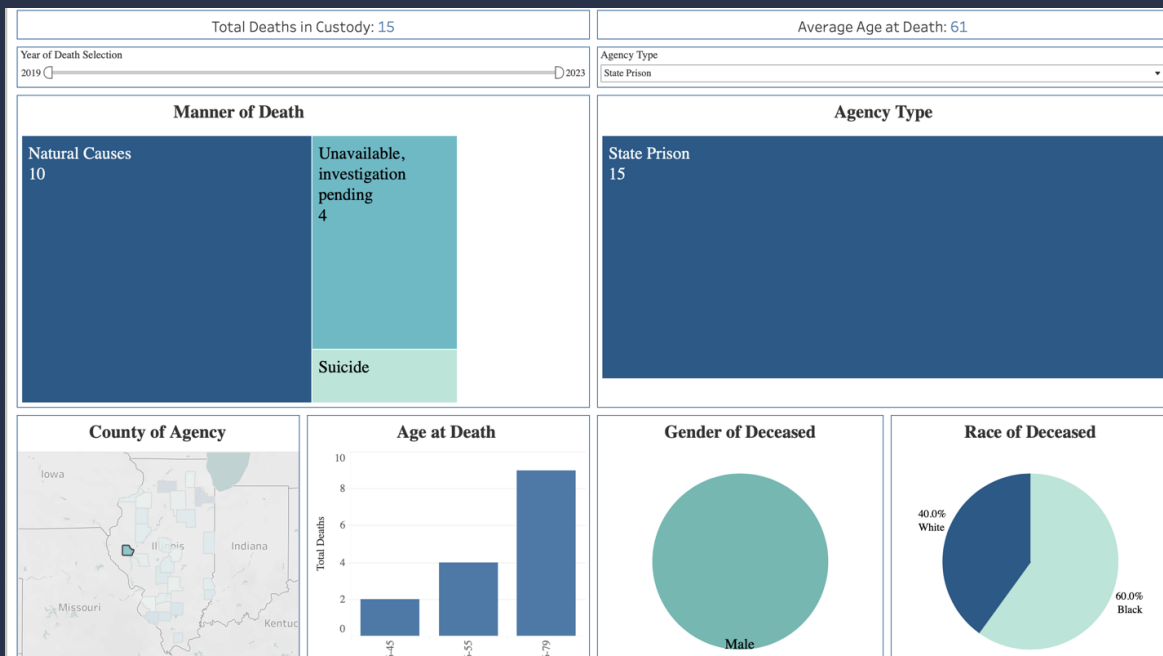
During JHA’s visit, administrators stated that they continue to try to get incarcerated people to share concerns about staff conduct, so they can investigate any issues. A few staff survey comments also noted the ongoing impact of Larry Earvin’s death on Western.

*I am concerned that a past incident at this facility has cast a shadow on its reputation and put the motives of staff in question. The misguided actions of a few staff caused a tragic incident that is not representative of the majority of the staff at this institution.*

*Western has been through a lot since the 2018 incident and the negative spotlight that continues to set out the staff at this facility has driven morale down and added undue stress to those that continue to work here. It’s not fair to the hardworking, good hearted people who are new to the facility or that continue to be dedicated to their work that they should be lumped in to the category of behavior exhibited by the officers who are now serving time for their crimes. There are good people here that do a great job and they should be acknowledged. So long as we continue to be beat down by the past, we will never be able to heal and move forward.*

JHA advocated for increased transparency regarding deaths in custody, resulting in the passage of a 2021 law and new reporting requirements. [Illinois Death in Custody Reporting data](#) shows **15 reported deaths at Western between 2019 and July 2023, and 509 reported deaths in Illinois state prisons**. As of December 2023, for the reported deaths at Western, one was classified as a suicide, ten were reported to be from [natural causes](#), and four had investigations pending. One with an investigation pending was for [the death](#) of a 36-year-old Black man in April 2023, where public death reporting information states that his cellmate said he found the deceased unresponsive in bed. JHA was contacted by family of the deceased who had concerns about his cause of death and other issues.

Image below is from [ICJIA Dashboard](#)



# STAFF ISSUES

## Racism

What suggestions do you have for impr

Get rid of racism

*Racism and white Nationalist behavior is every where, Black and Hispanic men are overwhelming target by white staff.*

*The racism! Black and Brown men are talk down to and while all the whites that work here are not racist, many sit back and don't say anything when their Fellow Guards are wrong.*

*Overall they just hate inmates and refuse to help us Everything is a punishment if you no White. "If you're White Your Right." Quote from CO's.*

What are the most negative things about life in this prison?

Having racist people in charge of almost every aspect of your life and with the power to make your life miserable for their entertainment.

Western MQPL surveys contained many comments and concerns about staff racism generally, with related terminology appearing in the [Western Top Ten Indicator Words](#) used in response to the question "What are the most negative things about life in this prison." Future analysis of surveys will be able to show if respondents of color reported more negative experiences. Anecdotally, this seems to be the case, although some White respondents also noted racism at the prison, e.g., *"White men watching over Black men. White men first time ever dealing with Black men. Many Black inmates are treated differently from me. As a white man I notice the unfair treatment of Black People."*

In addition to concerns regarding racism relating to instances of death in custody or staff violence, in survey comments some people stated that staff still use unacceptable discriminatory or hateful language, including the N-word, "boy," and "monkey." A few people commented they believed staff were "white supremacist" and someone mentioned some staff wear "Hitler-style

*mustaches.” Someone wrote, “the other day I seen a white C/O waring a all black hat that said I hate Blank People and nobody told him to take it off or repremand him. Any good C/O's are scared to lose there job they do not say Anything.”*

Some other recent examples that people felt demonstrated discrimination at Western were more indirect. There were some examples of Black people being treated differently than White people, e.g., *“I've been incarcerated for over twenty years and I've never been exposed to so much racism and childish and unprofessionalism by staff. They have no respect toward the blacks and latinors but are super friendly and helpful and supportive to the white inmates. I saw (last night) where the wing officer passed out "legal mail" that is privileged and the officer opened the envelope while the black inmate signed for it, but when he got to a cell that was occupied with two whites he handed the legal mail to the white inmate and allowed the inmate to open it and sign for it, as he should have.”* In another example, someone who is Black and has a deep voice reported he was ticketed for being disrespectful or threatening for tone when he was speaking in his normal voice. During the visit JHA was told that TV channel BET was blocked on Juneteenth and that it was the only channel that was out, and that it came back on the day of the JHA visit. Likewise, a survey comment stated, *“This prison and many others in IL Took chanel 15 off or TVs witch is BET, the only network that show black content. They say and do things to black people here to let us know that they do not like us.”*

There were also some concerns regarding use of discipline in a discriminatory manner, particularly [C-Grade](#) privilege restrictions, which are not tracked in the same manner as use of restrictive housing. This is further discussed below under [Discipline](#).

*Black lives do not matter in this Prison. They set us in dangerous cell assignments. They tell us we have to fight our cellies in order to get moved, or refuse housing. Blacks and Hispanic men are overwhelming Placed in C-Grade, sent to Segregation, Placed on the C-Grade wing, denied Phone Calls and Communication with our families. So White C/O even tell you they do not like our kind.*

Please write any other comments or feedback on this survey below.

Black Lives matter Black Lives matter  
Black Lives matter Black Lives matter  
Black Lives matter Black Lives matter

There were also many comments in surveys regarding the lack of staff diversity and recommending increasing staff diversity for a possible improvement to the prison.

What suggestions do you have for improvement in this prison?

Security Staff DIVERSITY! Bring in more BLACK Security Staff. That will stop alot of Bullshit

*Western has no diversity amongst staff they all stick together even when they know somethings wrong or being done to harm inmates they have an (extreme) racist culture with security staff towards colored inmates*

*Staff is Negative Toward Minority, Not One Black officers Here—This Place is Horrible And Very Racist*

Like many other prisons in Illinois, Western is located in a rural community in one of Illinois' least populous counties. Per [2022 census data](#), Brown County where Western is located had a population of only about 6,300 people, and was 78.6% White (5,172) and 17.9% Black (1,128). However, this census data counts the population of the prison (1,700) and was heavily skewed by this fact, as the [Illinois law changing how people in prison are counted in the census](#) had not yet been implemented. As shown [above](#), at the time of JHA's June 2023 visit, 20% of Western's population and 97% of the staff were White; 66% of the population (1,162) and 1% (3) of the staff were Black. Per 2022 census data Illinois as a whole was 76.1% White and 14.7% Black, compared to Cook County which is 65.1% White and 23.6% Black. IDOC as a whole in June 2023 was reported as about 54% Black, 33% White, and 13% Hispanic.



While IDOC has been working on recruitment and advancement opportunities, attracting and retaining staff remains a serious challenge. During the JHA visit, Western administrators noted that many people of color they have hired have been promoted. Some incarcerated people believed that some diverse staff left because of climate at the facility. JHA inquired whether IDOC had been conducting exit interviews to help surface any such issues or if they had any data on retention of staff that could be shared. Western administrators noted that some people of color who have worked at the prison and left have actually been temporary agency staff used to supplement Wexford nursing staff deficits and that these positions are for traveling nurses who do not stay at locations for extended periods, and such employment is handled by Wexford.

What are the most positive things about life in this prison?

Nothing at all, this prison make you hate white people or person's in charge.

## Other Staff Conduct Concerns

What are the most positive things about life in this prison?

When i'm locked in my cell the officers can no longer bully me like they do when I leave my cell.

*the staff does there best to make your time hard.*

*Most of the staff I've encountered seem to go out of their way to be an asshole, i.e., make you late for a visit, make ignorant comments, abuse their power.*

What are the most negative things about life in this prison?

CO Pick on old men

78% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they did not feel they were treated with respect by staff. However, only 54% reported that they did not get along well with officers on their unit, again suggesting, as at other prisons, that there may be some more positive relationship factors with proximity.

73% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they did not feel they were treated as a human being. 78% reported that some of the treatment they receive is degrading.

Many people at Western in 2023 described staff behavior as “*bullying*” and otherwise negative and aggressive. 84% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported staff are argumentative towards incarcerated people. Examples of provocation included name-calling, e.g., “*dumb ass.*” People also said staff “*threatened*” them. Someone mentioned COs threw people’s ID cards and made them go pick them up. Yelling and yelling through the intercom system were mentioned. Some people reported that COs laugh at incarcerated people and say things like, “*It’s Western, we do what we want.*”

*[The most negative thing about Western is] How incarcerated people are treated inhumane and staff doing provocative things so we can be excluded from earning good time to get home to our family.*

People reported that staff provoke or escalate individuals in order to use discipline, force, mace, or to give “*bogus*” tickets. Some people reported staff encouraged or were improperly unaware of fights. Some also described discipline that did not appear to reflect use of incremental progressive sanctions as is supposed to apply under IDOC policy, including reporting excessive application of C-grade privilege restrictions.

A few people reported mace was used frequently or excessively, e.g., “*They have murdered inmates here. They mace people daily here.*” Use of chemical agents is publicly reported by prison and month in [IDOC Quarterly Reports](#), e.g., in June 2023, nine of 82 reported uses of chemical agents in IDOC occurred at Western. Nine uses at an IDOC prison was tied for the third most frequent use that month with Dixon, behind Menard and Pinckneyville. There are many factors that must be considered when evaluating use of chemical agents, but it seems notable that the other facilities had [much higher identified seriously mentally ill populations](#), which often correlates with increased use. The chemical agent use at Western for June 2023

was at a rate of .53 per 100 people, and this was the sixth highest reported rate in IDOC prisons. **Use of chemical agents should be reviewed on an ongoing basis.**

In addition to racism against people of color, discrimination and harassment of people with sex offense convictions was a common theme, e.g., *"I have been beat, put into situations that cause me harm by the staff because of my sex offender status - I know Im not the only one. I just want to do my time peacefully."*

Please write any other comments or feedback on this survey below.

The Staff PICK ON A LOT OF  
people who HAVE SEX CASES

Some JHA visitors felt that individuals they spoke with were not comfortable or afraid when speaking to us due to staff presence. Several people commented that there is a *"brotherhood"* among staff where people in custody will never be believed or supported against other staff.

In addition, some incarcerated people stated that they felt their families were also treated disrespectfully or poorly at Western.

What are the most negative things about life in this prison?

Everything. They put their hands on people whenever they feel like it and talk about peoples loved ones.

Please write any other comments or feedback on this survey below.

There mentally tryna break us here I thought this was suppose to be a place to rehabilitate people but there doing the total opposite. This place is negative and is no place for a human. I've been to better prisons than this. Everything about this place is terrible from the way they treat us talk to us, health care service. They even give your family a hard time + the run around when they come up here or call the facility. Its just sad it's like there tryna kill us mentally they hate to see you smiling here and it's a lot of stereotype and racism that still exist here it just not fair honestly

*I got treated better and with more respect at Menards Max. My family says the same thing. They don't like coming here because of how badly the staff treats them + the children. Prison is my punishment not for guards/staff to continue to punish us.*

*Our families send pictures & they say money, emoji not allow or is contraband but how? Then our families come out of town and they not allowing us inmate to get extra time on the out of time visits. As well as in the visiting room it still have the plastic glass up between us and our families why is that when covid is out now & our people don't have to be vacined why do they treat us & our families like shit I can't say dogs because I no they treat they dogs better than us.*

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Although the COVID vaccination requirement for IDOC staff and visitors was suspended in mid-January 2023, it took several more months for other restrictions to be lifted in prisons, such as removal of visitation room Plexiglas dividers. JHA continues to hear from some people that visitors having to [schedule visits](#) in advance online, as was established during the pandemic, is a barrier to receiving visits.

## Grievances & Accountability

**What suggestions do you have for improvement in this prison?**

Accountability

Data provided by administrators showed of 2,241 grievances received at Western from January to May 2023. 1,125 (about 50%) had been completed, 33 were Affirmed (3% of reviewed grievances), 14 had Mixed outcomes (1%), 476 were Denied (42%), and 600 were found to be Moot (53%). An additional 481 Emergency Grievances had been completed.

Reportedly there were zero grievances classified as being regarding Discrimination under the category of Staff Conduct, although there were 54 reports of Verbal/Harassment and there was

a separate category for staff PREA issues (9). In total, Staff Conduct was indicated as the category in 12.5% of the recorded grievances, while Medical and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) issues made up 24%. IDOC's [Constituent Services reported for 2022](#) they received 671 (4.8%) contacts regarding Western out of 13,917 Agency-wide.

JHA received several concerns regarding lack of grievance integrity. Some individuals stated they were afraid to raise issues with staff or file grievances.

*The people who work at this prison, either they know each other and/or are related to one another (Husband & wife, Brothers, cousins or nephews). The problem with that is if you have a problem and you complain about it or write grievances etc. The staff (counselors included) talk amongst each other and they turn against, seek retribution, and spread false rumors about you to other inmates..."He's a snitch; He's a Baby raper; or He's gay." Etc.*

*Inmates are afraid to file grievances because staff Routinely retaliate and make Examples of them. other inmates who do file don't know about outside resources such as Legislators and Department of Justice to file their complaints. Even when they do, mail does not reach those destinations, so their is a lot of Frustration, despair which in turn makes many inmates turn to drugs or act out just to go to seg where they know they'll be left alone.*

THE C.O.'S CARE TOO MUCH ABOUT INCONSEQUENTIAL MATTERS AND NOT ENOUGH ABOUT THE ACTUAL IMPORTANT THINGS. ALL IN ALL, IT DEPENDS ON WHO'S WORKING THAT DAY. SOME C.O.'S ARE FINE, BUT MOST ARE INFAMOUS FOR BEING DISRESPECTFUL OR DECEITFUL. GOD FORBID THEY FIND OUT YOU SAID ANYTHING BAD ABOUT THEM OR FILED A GRIEVANCE ON THEM BECAUSE THEY WILL DO ALL THEY CAN TO MAKE YOU MISERABLE, AND YOU'RE POWERLESS TO STOP IT.

*To sum up this survey, I am a Black man, And here at Western Illinois Correctional Center, I'm surrounded by racist of all ages and they are in control of the grievance committees everything in the prison. If I have a problems with one of them, It's a problem with them all. Now let me (hear) or read your response.*

Lack of staff accountability was mentioned frequently by Western survey respondents, as noted above.

*The staff aren't held accountable while residents get treated any kind of way. Grievances go Nowhere. Former officers handle grievances.*

*No staff follows their rules when it applies to them. Staff believe they can do whatever they want, say whatever they want, take whatever they want without any thoughts that they will be disciplined.*

*Bad reports on officer Just pile up. Officers feel invincible.*

**JHA again recommends that Illinois create an Independent Ombudsman for corrections and that the grievance process be improved.**

*grievance procedure is a joke, grievance emergencies take up to 10 mo for a response.*

As noted above, several people suggested body cameras for staff to increase accountability. Some particularly mentioned that camera review should be used to ensure staff are actually making rounds. **JHA noted that it should be normal practice to spot check to ensure they are occurring properly and that having cameras with audio monitoring might also help monitor and improve conduct.**

*Warden walks around on the wings regularly which is once a month*

IDOC has instituted a practice of having Wardens regularly tour housing units with an administrative team. A few people at Western commented that during administrative tours staff do not stop and talk to them, which was an issue also raised at other prisons.

In visit follow up, **JHA noted it would be helpful for administrators to share deidentified information regarding use of staff discipline, e.g. by numbers and type, over the past few years to better demonstrate that administration is responding to concerns.** Administrators responded, *“We cannot provide specific information on staff discipline. However, the Department takes accountability serious and refer individuals for discipline upon substantiated or identified violations of departmental policy.”* **JHA continues to recommend that more systemwide information be made available about staff conduct and discipline, this data is needed to better identify and respond to concerns and hold staff and their supervisors accountable for their professional behavior.**

## Search & Shakedown Issues

JHA received some PREA sexual abuse or harassment reports including examples of seemingly abusive or unnecessarily humiliating searches at Western.

*The Harassment, sexual abuse and derogatory Name The guards commit Toward me. I have even been depantsed.*

During the visit, someone reported *“they do cavity searches”* and there was also a concerning survey comment, *“Stop the severe shakedowns that involve strip searches and cavity searches. Stop the destruction of inmates personal legal papers by scrambling stacks of papers used for appeals in court. That behavior is criminal.”* JHA requested any information regarding cavity searches performed at Western and administrators responded, *“Staff at the Western Illinois Correctional Center are at no point authorized to perform a “cavity search” per A.D. 05.01.113 all unclothed searches will be visual only, If staff think an individual in custody is concealing an item in their rectum, they must contact the shift supervisor immediately.”*

Some people reported use of shakedowns that were noted to be particularly destructive or *“terrorizing.”*

*They Throw all The stuff away They sell you on commissary & putting they Hands on us For no reason*

*Staff indiscriminately throws legal/privileged items in the trash, especially tact-team (I just lost over 20 items, 1/2 was food worth up to \$25, others are items they NO longer sell so its like intentionally [ILLEGIBLE] confiscation. When c/os confiscate items during shakedowns that are legal to possess, they DO NOT record item taken on a shakedown slip, so the burden of proving theft is insurmountable.*

*Bringing in the tack team from other prisons who tear up your cell, eat your food, throw items away that they are not suppose to, things that has been bought from the commissary.*

There were a few comments regarding staff purposefully breaking or taking items as retaliation. Someone reported they had a photo of their child confiscated when other things, including artwork, were taken as being allegedly “STG” (Security Threat Group, or gang) related.

## Staff Morale

*Staff morale is very bad, and it impacts all aspects of the job.*

*Staff morale is low, very low. Filling jobs to create less overtime would result in less stress.*

*I've to several institutions during my [10+] years of incarceration however this is the first where its obvious by staff that they don't want to be here. No matter if its COs, Lts, Healthcare, Mental health, and its not because of offenders. Its because of the institution. This is what I was told by a CO who no longer works here and a LT who is trying to find another job. These feelings are why offenders are mistreated. The staff is only here by force.*

Unsurprisingly given reported [vacancies](#), some staff survey respondents identified staffing levels as one of the most stressful parts of working at Western.

*Low staffing levels and too much complacency*

*Trying to cover staffing needs, with not enough staff, nor enough vehicles to provide needed outside movement escorts.*

Some staff felt lack of support from administrators.

*Not getting the support and acknowledgement from management. Feeling like no matter what you do it is never enough or good enough. Always walking on eggshells. Hearing other staff talk about how bad this place makes them feel and that they only come to work for a check.*



*The fact that Springfield cares more about these individuals in custody than they do about the staff.*

*Hire Wardens that care about their staff and can understand that with the poor staffing statewide, that there are limitations to the "Do more with less" mindset. This also goes for the Administration in Springfield. It doesn't relate to the facilities well when the "leaders" in Springfield have never worked in a prison and have not lived the life of this profession, but want to make the rules they "think" are for the good of the facility. Staff in this facility are constantly talking about finding employment elsewhere due to the direction IDOC is heading.*

Other staff noted concerns regarding colleagues and pointed out systems of advancement that are not perceived as based on merit.

*It greatly concerns me how job positions are filled here. Some positions (for example Counselor jobs) seem to be filled by staff based on seniority and on what grade they received. Many seem to be getting A grades when they really are not qualified for the position. My big concern is staff getting positions they are really not the best qualified for and that in turn discourages the staff who are qualified for it with education, work experience and etc. I feel this discourages the qualified staff with wanting to continue to work at WICC and they seem to start looking for employment somewhere else. Also, filling jobs with unqualified staff affects the performance and meeting the goals WICC has established. WICC will continue to lose qualified and good employees if they don't change this process.*

Other than attention to staffing, suggestions to address identified morale issues from Western staff included:

*restoring small things for staff would have a remarkable improvement on morale, such as allowing more items to be purchased for employee commissary and allowing fundraising to resume for Employee Benefit Committee's and allowing those funds to be used for Employee week and other morale boosting activities.*

*Spotlight some of the positive changes that have happened at Western with LTS programs, Clinical programs, and the Clayton Work Camp. Give credit to the staff for their efforts. There*

*are many here that do much more than their job requires because they actually care about the work and the positive impact it has. Give our positive efforts a voice.*

Staff survey responses also shared insight regarding the most satisfying things about working at Western:

*Appreciation of colleagues and opportunities for mentorship*

*I felt the most satisfied when my job had me working with Individuals. I tried to make a difference within my job duties to hopefully in turn make a difference with the Individuals when they are released.*

*Knowing that I am part of the bigger picture.*

*That IIC are treated in a firm, fair and consistent manner at this facility, which makes for much less conflict among staff and IIC. I have worked at other facilities in which IIC were not treated fairly and the favoritism and friendships formed created opportunity for staff to be hooked up and for conflict among the IIC tense because some were treated with less favoritism than others. The staff at this facility maintain a more professional level with the IIC, they help them if it is within their job scope, but do not get involved in matters of a personal nature and will direct them to staff that can help them with their issues.*

Some staff shared hopes for positive changes.

*I am hopeful things will change for the better so I do not have to look for employment somewhere else.*

*Thank you for addressing this with line staff. Most of us are motivated to contribute to a safe and sustainable environment that helps all of us.*

# HEALTHCARE

Please write any other comments or feedback on this survey below.

Please look into health care and dental. Look into prison complaints.

*Western Illinois Correctional Center proper healthcare is NEVER given!!! I was left with scabies and ringworm for 3 years before proper treatment started, then H.C.U. [Health Care Unit] stopped treatment in the middle, for no reason except cruel + unusual punishment!!!*

*The new Healthcare staff treats us as people where as before they wouldn't even look at me*

*The mental health and health care is the worse ive ever seen—when you file a grievance here nothing ever gets done. Its always considered moot.*

As noted previously, medical issues comprised the highest area of recorded prison grievances. At the time of the June 2023 JHA visit, only 22 of 66 Wexford healthcare staff positions at Western were filled. As of November 2023, 49 [Wexford positions](#) were posted in Mt. Sterling; as of late March 2024, there were 44.

During the June 2023 JHA visit, people reported having to file three sick call requests before being seen or waiting for months. People reported delays for outside care. Some people reported waiting years in some cases due to COVID and other issues. Lack of response to medical grievances within 60 days was also reported.

[Writs](#) and transport issues for outside care were raised by both incarcerated people and staff as concerns. Staff noted the strain on staffing for this and lack of adequate access to appropriate transport vehicles.

Several people reported not receiving medications or devices, some of which had been prescribed by other IDOC doctors or outside specialists. Healthcare staff reported that pharmacy subcontractor Boswell was not providing medications. **JHA has received multiple reports from staff that medications were not being provided and again recommends**

**documentation and public reporting of this issue**, which will inevitably result in further harm and litigation.

Additionally, ADA issues were raised. Some people reported that they did not have their hearing accommodations continued from other prisons and the audiologist comes once a month at best.

**JHA advised that better practice would be to allow people things they already had until audiologist review.** The aging population of prisons requires effective management of such issues. 24.3% of Western's population was over 50-years-old.

*We Need help from the Governor. Individuals like myself that are older now. We don't deserve to be here. We do not have a chance of ever getting out. We are dying every day. Please help us.*

Mental health staffing at Western was also unacceptably low, with just one licensed mental health provider and a behavioral health technician (BHT).

What are the most negative things about life in this prison?

There are no competent mental health members so I ignore my condition so they can't use it against me.

Five percent of Western's population was designated Seriously Mentally Ill (SMI). Some people JHA spoke to on the visit said they should be designated SMI but were not.

Individuals in custody commented that people could only be seen by mental health in Restrictive Housing or for crisis. **JHA advised this should not be the case because it is better for everyone involved if people reach out for help before having a crisis or behavior issues.** Some people felt that security staff improperly acted as gatekeepers for mental health or crisis care.

- 41% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents felt mental health treatment was not available.
- 87% reported their experience of imprisonment at Western has been stressful

- 78% reported their experience is painful.
- 76% reported that anyone who harms themselves is considered by staff to be more of an attention seeker than someone who needs help

JHA visitors were frequently asked for help with receiving mental health care when speaking with incarcerated people during the visit. Several people told us that just having someone speak with them was helpful. Some people reported wanting to speak with mental health staff for help dealing with grief for loss of family members. **JHA advised that IDOC consider if this is an area where peer support could be helpful in light of staffing shortages.** Additionally, we note that Stateville administrators reported having a memorial and providing other ways for people to grieve and receive support acknowledging the losses of the COVID pandemic had been a positive at their facility.

*Staff still don't know how to deal with mentally ill people.*

*[suggestion for improvement] For staff to be trained better at deescalation and how to deal with mental health patients.*

Suicidality from the lockdown environment was shared. A few people reported being newly medicated just to deal with their housing situations. Some people also commented on the inappropriateness of the restrictive environment for first timers or those being released soon. 26% of Western's population had a projected release date within a year, not accounting for possible sentencing credits which should further reduce individuals' time.

*The officers wont do anything to help anyone, only like to punish people. I could go on and on. This is the worst place Ive ever been. It makes me want to kill myself but if I tell someone I will be put in a cell naked with nothing at all and all my stuff will get stolen by the inmates that have access to our property in receiving. I tried to get transferred to a mental health facility but was told theres no way I would quality, even though Im schizophrenic, hear voices and see things that aren't there. If i had more time and wasn't so close to my out date i would hang myself in my cell while my celly was gone to yard for an hour and a half.*

*I cut my arm + swallowed 3 batteries ... Ive only been seen once since I came off crisis watch ... I'm begging for help. Will you help me or am I better off dead? I mean thats what staff told me when I came to them with my situation.*

People were housed on crisis in the receiving area where cells did not have outlets for fans to be used in the summer heat and someone who had been housed in the area in winter reported being freezing cold with no extra blankets provided. Lack of mental health contacts and hygiene concerns were also raised. We were especially concerned regarding one individual we spoke with during the visit who had been on a crisis watch for more than a month, who seemed to be having delusions but was able to communicate. Another individual on that status stated he had been on crisis five times. In general, in IDOC, **JHA continues to see too many people staying in crisis status because of lack of appropriate treatment in general population or ability to transfer to a higher-level treatment setting.**

When JHA later visited the [Joliet Treatment Center](#) in October 2023, we were told that there are monthly reviews for people to be transferred to Residential Treatment Unit (RTU) or in-patient treatment beds. However, **only about 15 people (including women) were housed at the Joliet Inpatient Treatment Center and that population had not substantially increased since the opening of that facility in June 2022.** JHA has concern that without adequate healthcare staffing at the sending institutions for proper referral, as well as lack of staff in designed mental health treatment settings, ongoing issues surrounding [transfers](#) in IDOC, uncertainty regarding class action mental healthcare [litigation status](#), which has since been dismissed, etc., that individuals in need are being overlooked and harmed.

## WRITS

Use of writs was reportedly taxing at Western at the time of the visit, with sometimes a third of the limited staff being out for transport on day shifts. Staff being used for transport reduced other movement at the prison. Some use of court writs as reported seemed unnecessary for particular types of proceedings, likely resulting in unneeded hardship on both staff and incarcerated individuals, as well as other costs.

**We recommended IDOC legal review agreements with courts to ensure video conferencing could not be used more effectively.** While defendants should appear for some hearings and lawyers undoubtedly prefer seeing clients in court rather than having to drive to Western to visit, often court appearances are non-substantive, continued, or could be handled remotely. Further input from stakeholders is needed, but this must accurately include consideration of the resource allocation and stresses on people in prisons created by this transport.

In June and July Western reported they had 128 court writs in 45 days, with 90% of these going to Cook County for criminal proceedings, a four to five-hour drive from the prison. Western officials estimated the cost of these 128 court writs minimally at nearly \$170,000 (estimated at \$148 in gas and two staff at \$1,142 per writ) and noted that this does not include additional staff costs for backfill, including use of overtime coverage at the prison to fill necessary staff posts, or additional vehicle costs.

Medical writs were also reportedly taking a lot of prison resources, and lack of available ADA vans was a reported problem and added expense with staff time for coordination and retrieval of a shared van from another prison. JHA heard this concern also from other prisons in 2023.

In June and July Western officials reported 173 medical writs/furloughs in 45 days. Although medical writs may be on average closer (while some may still be in Cook County), reportedly these trips still averaged nine hours a day on the road, and cost minimally approximately \$107,000 total between estimated gas and staff costs.

**JHA recommended review of vehicle use and allocation.** Given the aging prison population ([22% of IDOC's population are now over 50](#)), increased healthcare transport needs and costs – including things like ADA vans – should be included in housing, staffing, and expenditure planning.

# TRANSFERS

*this is the worst time of my life worst years people in this place loose they mind. I would like to get transfer asap to a different prison, this prison Don't care If you get bully or If u get rape I seen it happen they Dont care please help me! Im short term I shouldnt be here. Please Help*

*It's a disciplinary prison and has a lot of people who do not have to be here. I, have never been disciplined (no tickets) since being in IDOC so why am I still here? (10 years in IDOC)*

*I have been approved for almost 3 years to transfer and I'm still here.*

At the time of the visit, Western reported housing 235 people who were minimum security, which seemed in excess of what might be appropriate for work camp (which housed approximately 50 people) or other workforce needs. While it is not uncommon for people with lower security levels to be housed in higher security prisons in IDOC, it would be an improvement to house people in the lowest security, most normative, and most reintegrative setting possible. Particularly this is true when higher security settings are experiencing even greater use of lockdown and have more restrictions on productive activity. While some IDOC lockdown information is publicly reported in [Operations & Management Reports](#), JHA believes from review this information it is likely incomplete and does not always reflect use of partial lockdowns, or other movement restrictions such as yard cancelations, which are more frequent.

*They shouldn't have min security wing in a med facility and not give us any other different privileges than the Med.*

At Western, as at other prisons JHA visited in 2023, several people commented that they had transfers approved (in some cases for quite a long time) but they were still there. While some of these approved transfers were for minimum-security placements, people could also be approved for a transfer to one of IDOC's other medium-security prisons. Although many transfers were prevented during the pandemic, by summer 2023 it was unclear why normal transfer and transport practices had not resumed, although some staff still cited the IDOC healthcare authority and COVID precautions.



Since the visit, in follow up communications in August 2023, Western administrators reported about a 20% decrease in minimum-security people housed at the medium-security prison, but noted that many of those remaining had a release date that is too soon for them to be submitted for transfer to a minimum-security facility. JHA was informed by IDOC officials that generally if someone is within six months of release they will not be transferred to a new prison without an exceptional reason.

JHA requested some data regarding actual bedspace availability given reports we have heard regarding difficulties for people to be transferred to lower security when approved and updated information regarding numbers of people approved for transfer who are waiting. As of August 10, 2023 there were over 300 general population minimum-security prisons male bedspaces reportedly available (and an additional 200+ in work release) available. However, JHA notes that the report provided did not accurately reflect closures of some facilities (such as the boot camps), showed wide fluctuations in numbers over various August dates, and may not reflect housing unit closures or other changes in capacity (as well as staffing concerns), so we were somewhat skeptical regarding accuracy and usability of the information.

In November 2023, IDOC officials stated that about 350 people throughout IDOC were approved and waiting for transfer to minimum-security prisons and another 350 were approved to transfer to medium-security prisons, which JHA believes includes both people awaiting positive transfers (lowered security level) and lateral transfers (transfers between prisons of the same security level). Transfers from reception centers are prioritized prior to use of transfers between prisons per IDOC officials. Presumably so are negative transfers, i.e., transfers for disciplinary reasons or increase in security level, although JHA has seen some individuals awaiting such transfers for much longer than expected periods in restrictive or receiving housing in various prisons in 2023. We were also informed that as with writs, a limited and aging fleet of vehicles, impede transfers. Staffing issues also appeared to negatively factor into transfer feasibility. Medical holds may additionally delay some people's transfers.

**JHA continues to advise IDOC to better plan for population needs and appropriate use of bedspace.**

# LIVING CONDITIONS

## Lack of Movement

*They only give us one day room per day unlike other mediums who get 2 they only give us one shop per month unlike other prisons who get 2 or more shops per month. They refuse to give us better cable channels these channels are few and sorry nothing on all day and we spend 22 1/2 hours a day in this cell it torture & super stressing on us with nothing on tv the viapath tablets suck they havent changed the services on the apps for 4 years.*

*Time in Gen Pop is the same as seg.*

What are the most negative things about life in this prison?

*Everything! They kill us/beat us <sup>B</sup> Just Lock Up In A Cell  
22 1/2 Hours A Day Sometimes Even Longer Than That.*

*We should be able to have more day room time and yard time. Its not good for your mental state to be couped up in a room or cell for more then 24 hours out the day. People can die or harm themself and no one whoever know cause they do hour checks sometimes, sometimes they dont even check on us. The CO's get paid way to much to sit around spit sun flower seed in a Fucking cup and talk about what there going to do when they get off work.*

*The staff here are over critical of operations here. Most of security staff here holds the opinion that individuals in custody should be locked in the cell all day and never given the opportunity to come out. They make hateful comments about anything that the individuals in custody here are allowed to do.*

**JHA again advised that time out-of-cell was too limited at Western.** Many people reported getting only an hour a day. Our understanding is the general population out-of-cell expectation at Western was only supposed to be 1.5 hours dayroom plus other yard and gym opportunities. A few people reported everything shut down at Western at 2 pm, and **JHA recommended that administrators look at second shift for creating opportunities, or follow the example we heard from IDOC medium-security prison Hill where first shift staffing was prioritized in**

**June (after JHA's 2023 MQPL surveys were administered there) to try to ensure more programmatic and out-of-cell activity occurred for more people.** JHA also heard at Lawrence that more staff were given weekend time off to try to keep staff on weekdays when more programming occurred. Throughout 2023 JHA continued to hear at various prisons that movement was limited due to staffing. In later 2023 we began to hear some administrative responses.

Some people at Western noted a positive compared to other prisons was that yard or gym was offered a few times a week. For example, someone wrote that a positive was, *"you get the opportunity to go to yard and the gym to exercise. That helps release stress in a positive way. More activities equals less stress. Less stress equals safer prison."* 82% of MQPL survey respondents reported getting yard at least twice a week.

However, 79% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they had neither a work or school assignment and administrators reported that 64% of Western's population was unassigned, so this likely means those **people could expect at best three hours a day out of cell on average**, including 1.5-hour dayroom, rotating yard/gym opportunities, and movement for dietary. **This is dangerously close to 22+ hours in cell standards qualifying as restrictive housing for medium-security general population individuals.** Limited time out of cells also results in lack of access to showers and phones.

Several people at Western noted that restrictive housing gets more out-of-cell time than general population there, which discourages good behavior and is a reverse incentive. Other people commented that they would rather be back at maximum-security prisons, which again discourages good behavior and is a reverse incentive. Someone commented, *"People rather get an assault to transfer than be here! Behind the wall is better than this medium facility!"*

Additionally, an unfruitful cycle where limited out-of-cell time creates more demand with tensions and fights over phones resulting in increased lockdown and less access to phones and more tension was reported. Concerningly, some people commented to the effect that with the lack of programming and productive activity at Western there was nothing for them to lose.

Many people at Western believed other IDOC medium prisons get two dayroom periods a day, typically one during first and one during second shift. Over 2023 visits to various prisons, JHA

has observed that some medium prisons had this out-of-cell expectation, but not all, and that staffing and other restrictions have frequently limited movement across security levels. **JHA continues to recommend more out-of-cell time in general.** The Department should let people know what the expectations for dayroom and other out-of-cell time are at all the prisons. Establishing minimum movement expectations and creating areas with reliably more freedom of movement could be used as part an effective incentive system for people to behave well in hopes of transfer or getting to an incentive area. A noted issue at Western's [Incentive Wing](#) was lack of additional time out-of-cell.

## Dietary, Commissary, Supply & Property Issues

*Been Feeding us ham & beans Hot Dogs for a whole month now*

*Dietary is hot dogs and cabbage 4 times to 5 times a week.*

*they been giving us this hot dog like substance, crumbed into this later sleeve like substance, we don't know what kind of meat it is but it's gross, we've had it at least 15 times in the past 9 days. On Wednesday March 29th 2023 we received this "sausage" for Lunch & dinner with only cabbage & a few carrot pieces 2 banana this is not acceptable. We were left starving from dinner time at approx 4:15 pm until breakfast at 2:15 am thursday which was only 2 boiled eggs & some "grit," a peices of bread. They are feeding us very very poorly which is a concern for my health as well as the health of others*

*3 meals a day (Kinda) [...] There is a food shortage right now, but having workers in the dietary that actually want to work, instead of being drafted would make a world of difference.*

During the Western visit, JHA was told by staff that there had been some ongoing dietary and commissary supply issues. 80% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they were not satisfied with food from dietary, compared to 58.1% in 2019 and 81% in 2017, suggesting perhaps some pandemic-era decline. Several people commented on small dietary portions. Some reported being hungry. There were multiple survey comments about hot dogs and other undesirable foods being served many times in a row, e.g., *"They feed us cock in the sock*

*everyday sometimes twice a day. Commissary 1 a month. Everyones losing weight looking sick.*” JHA advised that improving food can be one of the easier ways to improve morale and wellbeing.

Some people reported they felt IDOC was “*weaponizing*” food or withholding food as punishment, in particular on the C-Grade wing. JHA was concerned to also hear this reported from some other IDOC prisons’ disciplinary housing in 2023. **As disciplinary policies are revised there is need for heightened vigilance regarding use of unauthorized sanctions.**

JHA was told by Western administrators that commissary was occurring less than every two weeks with a \$150 limit. **We again noted we would like to see uniformity with shopping or at least clear communication of expectations and when there are exceptions.** Lack of predictability leads to other issues with hoarding, or short supply, etc. Having excess or scarce items in turn leads to more distress with shakedowns.

*[We need] More ways for people who dont have support system or way to get money. And we need bigger state pay a month \$13.50 aint going to cover phone time Link units or GTL msg, and put something in our box for the next month. We only go to store once every month for \$150 the limit and we cant get everything we need in one shop. So we should be able to spend what we need to be able to live some what comfortable.*

*The food situation is very bad and unhealthy. The commissary is the worse and most expensive Ive ever seen. plus we only go once a month and there are unreasonable limits on everything*

Several people told us they were only shopping once a month. People reported stock issues. Some people believe the workers’ units were shopped after restocking and others did not have opportunity to buy items. People reported clothing and linens were unavailable, underclothes in particular. At Western, as at many IDOC prisons, people again raised that the smaller fans now sold are ineffective. Diabetic friendly food options on commissary were requested, as were hair ties for dreadlocks.

52% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported that they had to buy and sell things in order to get by. Trading and trafficking may result in more use of discipline and interpersonal issues.

Many people reported not getting state provided cell or dayroom cleaning supplies. People reported to JHA that there was a black market for such items. This is a commonly reported issue in IDOC.

Several people at Western reported not having write outs or pens, which JHA noted should be part of core hygiene distribution. We requested information regarding when these items were last distributed at Western and administrators in August 2023 replied: *“Pens were sent out for delivery on May 31, 2023 and Canary envelopes were sent out for delivery on June 14, 2023. Direction was given that 1 pen and 3 canary envelopes are to be distributed on a monthly basis. This direction has been given to the CSIII and moving forward, these items will be issued at the beginning of every month. All items were provided on 8/3/23. The canary envelopes that are issued monthly are of letter size and postage is not needed by the Individual in Custody.”* **We continue to advise reporting need for such items as understanding and distribution of core items across prisons did not appear uniform.**

Poor condition of state-issued clothing was mentioned several times as an issue for people at Western. Someone reported he received multiple tickets for having *“altered pants”* but that they were issued to him and he did not know how they were reportedly altered and that he had requested other pants but not received them. Western administrators replied, *“Lt.’s and Sgt.’s assigned to the housing units and walks are to observe the clothing of Individuals in Custody to ensure that their State blues are not altered, torn, etc. If staff find that the State blues are in need of repair, they are either sent to the clothing room or their name and number are sent via email to the clothing room supervisor. Tickets may be issued depending on how the much the clothes are altered and if it was done intentionally.”* **IDOC should make opportunities for clothing exchange available and document that this is done.** Someone should not receive repeated tickets for a single alleged clothing alteration when they are unable to replace the item. People should grieve unjust discipline.

Several people reported delays receiving property, and we were told at Western and at other IDOC prisons that this is often an area that staff are pulled from to fill necessary posts with short staffing. Some people noted that when items were broken by staff, the rate at which they may be eventually reimbursed was not sufficient to purchase new items.

# Outside Communications

What are the most negative things about life in this prison?

Reality/Racism/violence/ Separation From Family Members, The Destruction of Family.

*staff actively thwart and discourage our contact w/ our support*

39% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they were not able to maintain meaningful contact with their outside supports. 86% did not feel staff helped incarcerated people maintain this contact.

*I also believe if there was more time to use phones it will become a less hostile environment.*

As throughout IDOC, people at Western want the phone on tablets as limited access to phones was a source of conflict. Administrators shared with JHA that they had investigated phone use monopolization on a housing unit at Western and implemented changes. **JHA noted that we would like to see IDOC investigate a lot of other reported issues using available technology.**

Some people reported to JHA that their mail was not reaching people outside. JHA had no record of receiving mail from someone who stated he had sent us privileged mail. During the visit, someone was anxious that the Warden and Springfield directly receive some documents he stated were regarding an assault, and appeared distrusting of staff in his area to ensure they reached their destination.

People also reported that receiving mail and e-messages was slow, which is a common report from people within IDOC. Some people also commented on poor in-cell reception for tablets. People did not like that they continue paying for these services when they do not work in needed areas or that they continue to pay when they are restricted from access, e.g., for lockdowns or discipline.

## Refusing Housing

*If a Prisoner walks them-self, don't give them C-Grade or B-Grade. This Person may have a good reason for walking them-self. I did it to stay out of trouble and ended up in trouble. Keep us where we feel safe and are able to stay out of trouble so we can progress. Keep those who start trouble in one cell-house instead of moving them.*

*[suggested improvement] emergency buttons & people only in the cell with the same amount of time. I was raped & beat up for no reason*

*They'll put anybody in the cell w/out consulting you. And their's a big K2 problem + if your celly smoking that stuff you'll go down w/him.*

*they tell you if you're dealing with another inmate that has mental issues that you have to fight one another in order to be moved from a dangerous situation.*

Many people at Western reported that they are moved in housing assignments excessively and that this is a stressor with adapting to new cellmates. Someone wrote that one of the most negative things at Western is, *“That we can[t] move in cells with guys we get along. Instead of a random guy. That is loud, or poor hygiene. or uses drugs such as K2 in my life is not safe.”* Several people reported being ticketed or under investigation (and therefore housed in restrictive housing) because of cellmate conduct.

Some people also reported that they were still being sent to restrictive housing for refusing housing. JHA had been told that that this was not supposed to happen under IDOC policy unless someone was abusing cell changes. **We again recommended making clear what the expected consequence will be for refusing housing** and noted that there were safety concerns when people did not think they could be moved without sanction. Tickets have potentially serious consequences for people such as losing positive opportunity for programming, jobs, or sentencing credits. Additionally, someone at Western reported that he had asked to be moved and was ignored, resulting in a fight and his responsibility of thousands of dollars in restitution for his cellmate’s medical bill. Western administrators responded that expectations for housing refusals are that *“individuals are offered alternative housing first in the*



same housing unit, if they still refuse, they are then offered housing in another available unit. They are only taken to the receiving wing when they have refused all General Population options. Staff have been reminded to document these occurrences.”

## DRUGS

*[a positive is] That you get to sit in your cell and watch tv while watching the staff favorite pick inmates run all over doing drugs with staff.*

*In 20 years in the IDOC I have been around 3 drug overdoses. Since coming to Western CC [12+] months ago I've seen at least 20. I live in a drug infested environment.*

*The drug problem is not being resolved by SORT attacks. Most C/O's do nothing when they smell K-2. The masses get punished because the C/O's cannot handle the few.*

*There are drugs constantly coming into the facility and Springfield does nothing about it when we find those said drugs, nor do they find reasons to keep it from happening.*

*The influx of narcotics. Management is aware of it but choose to ignore it. This is very dangerous to line staff and individuals in custody.*

38% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents agreed that drugs cause a lot of problems between incarcerated people. In 2017 and 2019 JHA Western surveys only 7% and 5.3% of respondents agreed that contraband often got into the prison. In 2023 someone described the prison as *“saturated w/ drugs,”* a long termer noted, *“Drug use is out of control,”* and someone else noted, *“the only infraction not punished is drug use.”*

Several people reported to us getting in trouble for suspected drug related activity or their cellmate’s activity when they cannot get moved on request. Someone reported he owed \$5,000 for drugs and felt he could not get help. Multiple people commented regarding the lack of substance use disorder treatment or support at the prison.

*There is nothing positive about this prison I caught a drug case on which I was using drugs. The court recommended a program. This prison has no programs I can go through to change myself*

*They openly promote drug use + when you go to them and tell them you're an addict they tell you that "you're not eligible for treatment."*

*The staff are buy able, not all but more than you'd expect. They bring in drugs, phones, sell sex for cash app, and the worse part is they miss treat us, like we are nothing, nobodys, Down to degrade us. It's like mental torture.*

A few people reported staff misconduct in relation to bringing in drugs, or permitting dealing and use, or staff being intoxicated. Substance use disorder supports must be increased and JHA again recommended increased use of surveillance to curb misconduct.

In 2023, JHA heard a lot about drugs from staff and people in custody at various prisons, and we have encountered smoke from drug use in some housing units. While the presence of drug use in IDOC seems undebatable, JHA remains concerned regarding increasing reports of people being investigated or punished based on highly questionable evidence. People may spend longer in restrictive housing in investigative status than they should for a disciplinary ticket sanction. People also reported because drug detection was so difficult, staff could target them for pretty much any reason with a shakedown or an investigation.

*They have a bogus drug indicator called "Sirchie Narc II 2c Reagent Test Kit" which is only about 64% accurate. I'm in seg house unit because they found a piece of torn paper which was a state issued trust fund balance given to me on the prior day by the CO's in mail from the state.*

*They "tested" it & stated it came back positive for "synthetic cannabis"? "Intoxicants" which is bogus. [STAFF NAME REDACTED] falsely claimed that it was drugged laced & escorted me to seg.*

*The C/Os try to instigate every chance they get. And they try to talk like african americans do try to be funny and racist. They are going at HUGE inmates of C-grade and there finding pieces of paper in room and lying on people saying its K2 just because they dont like that inmate. I feel helpless.*

JHA raised the concern that there does not seem to be a good way to detect drugs on paper asking Western administrators for any further response, to which they replied this was a “*Statewide issue/concern.*” We also note such drug tests have been found unreliable in labs and [in court](#).

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IDOC provided JHA with some data regarding drug detection in the prisons for 2023 on request. The Agency reported 715 incidents of discovery in 2023, compared to 379 in 2022 (a 188% or nearly two-fold reported increase). Drugs were reported found at all but five minimum-security prisons out of 27 IDOC prisons. More than half of the 2023 reported drug discoveries were at just the two prisons with the highest incidences, maximum-security Menard (236) and Western (140), followed by Stateville (63). The most common place of the discoveries was reported to be in cells (307), followed by in mail (261), and on person (131). Almost a fifth (~19%) of the reported drug discoveries in mail were in legal mail. 92% of the reported drugs discovered were classified as synthetic cannabinoids, with the rest identified as other (29), marijuana (20), and fentanyl (9).

Several staff recommended that mail should be scanned.

*Distribution of tablets and scan mail onto them. I understand this takes the personal effects away from it but people are dying.*

**While JHA does not support elimination of physical mail, increasing availability and functionality of tablets is desirable.** Creating more efficient and lower cost means of communication would likely naturally reduce physical mail volume, aiding with staff concerns regarding screening, and would also generally increase wellbeing. Also, a properly functioning system that incentivized positive conduct and encouraged productive activity would likely disincentivize drug use. **It further remains vital that IDOC monitor staff for introduction of contraband and create more trusted and safe reporting mechanisms. Additionally, IDOC must offer people more access to substance use disorder treatment when it is sought.**

# DISCIPLINE

*[The most negative thing about Western is] The disciplinary system. I've been in my cell for over a month without yard or a phone call. Also the conduct of some of the officers is unacceptable. I've been degraded and treated like less than a human. I've also experienced racism on several occasions.*

*The staff. 85-100%. How the staff put or blame you for anything and right you a ticket. How they love to right a ticket and put you on C grade and not put you in school, programs or work.*

*They also choose to threaten individuals and write unnecessary tickets rather than talk calmly and explain unknown rules to individuals in custody.*

In the first five months of 2023, Western administrators reported 704 major and 445 minor disciplinary tickets were written, which was on track to exceed 2022 totals.

84% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported they did not think the disciplinary system was fair. 74% reported that staff use punishment without trying other options first.

Several people commented that they got more tickets and more restrictive housing time at Western than at other prisons. JHA received many concerning reports from people in restrictive status at Western.

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During the June 2023 visit, JHA was told by multiple people that three occupied cells on a housing unit we visited had gone without power for between three to five days.

Reportedly, someone in one cell blew out the power for those cells with a stinger (DIY heating device) over a holiday weekend. We were told that the person confessed and we did not understand why people could not be moved or get power back and noted it did appear to be improper group punishment. Additionally, some people told us they were afraid to raise the issue to staff or be seen as complaining. However, lack of power can be a safety issue. This neglect or use of informal disciplinary sanctions was concerning.

# Restrictive Housing

*our Personal Property is mixed all up together when being Sent to Seg.*

Some people in restrictive housing at Western reported they did not get opportunity for out-of-cell time or showers per [agency rules](#). For example, someone reported only being offered out-of-cell recreation once in 2.5 weeks and only being offered one shower a week. People held in restrictive housing who are not also on [grade privilege restrictions](#) are supposed to be able to use the phone but some reported they could not.

People wanted mental health contacts and some reported they had been requesting contacts for extended periods, in one case for 10 months. There was concern about people being given others' medications.

Biting insects were reported in cells. People reported it was hot and that fans are not allowed in restrictive housing at Western, unlike other at some other prisons. Someone reported the light switch in his cell electrocuted him.

Some people requested basic items like a blanket or shower shoes. Someone reported that he did not get to eat. JHA was told that someone was escorted to the unit naked and that people were cuffed and left in showers for hours.

JHA shares these kinds of concerns, identified or de-identified as requested by each person, with IDOC so that they are made aware of issues and can address them. JHA has no authority to enforce compliance or receive follow-up data; ongoing monitoring of prisons and privileged communications affords us the opportunity to revisit issues and concerns and learn what or if a response or remedy was provided.

## C-Grade Wing

*They use unnecessary punishment. They don't give you the opportunity to communicate on the phone to tell your family you're alright once you get in trouble. They don't give you your mail all the time and don't tell you what for. And as long as you're on this C-Grade wing they give you no calls, no yards, no gym, no commissary.*

Use of C-Grade housing was problematic at Western and at other prisons JHA visited throughout 2023, as was noted to be an issue in JHA's 2021 [Sheridan Monitoring report](#). JHA advised IDOC officials that Western's C-Grade wing had the negative climate of a high-anxiety restrictive housing unit and that it did not seem at all rehabilitative or constructive. Someone stated C-Grade makes him *"homicidal."*

People did not understand their privilege restrictions. Many people did not understand that C-Grade restricts phone and video visits under the administrative code. Some of these restrictions were lifted during the pandemic but have since resumed. **Again, JHA recommends the Department change this policy to not restrict outside contacts for discipline. JHA also recommended ensuring people in C-Grade status have access to information about their status and privilege restrictions, as they are supposed to in restrictive housing.** While some of C-Grade restrictions were according to [departmental rules](#), which theoretically could be read in a manual, other observed restrictions used at Western were not.

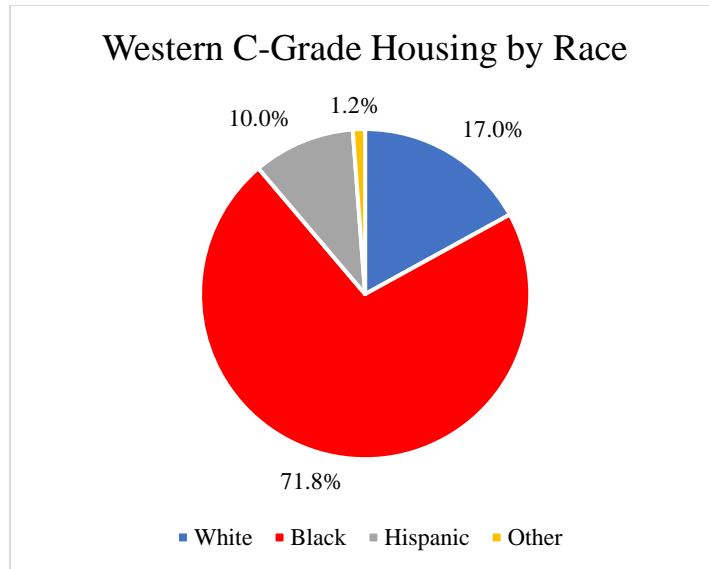
At Western many people housed in the C-Grade wing had excessive restrictions. People should not have movement restrictions (such as yard, gym, or dayroom) for unrelated conduct, i.e. conduct that does not relate to those areas. During the visit, JHA was told that Springfield and the Administrative Review Board (ARB) had recently reiterated this and people at Western had been reviewed. However, during the visit JHA spoke with multiple people where it did not appear that was the case. We were told that all the people on the lower right-hand side of the unit were on yard and dayroom restrictions, and others interviewed reported they too were in that situation who were not in that location. Someone with restrictions reported just getting 10 minutes out-of-cell to shower. Another person reported getting out-of-cell only 30 minutes a day. **JHA advised that these restrictions needed to be retroactively reviewed and removed, not just applied correctly by the disciplinary Adjustment Committee going forward.**

People housed in the C-Grade wing did not feel they were getting lesser punishment than in restrictive housing. In fact, several stated they felt punishment was worse or double what they should have been given, because the C-Grade time was served after restrictive housing or was for a longer period than would be permitted for use of restrictive housing sanctions. Someone reported being given six months C-Grade for disobeying a direct order, which does not sound like use of progressive discipline. This individual reported he did not know how to earn his way off the status and that he had since incurred additional tickets.

Several people requested mental health contacts and some stated that they had new mental health troubles or even were newly medicated due to the stress of the C-Grade unit. Someone reported his audio-visual privileges had been recommended to be restored by mental health staff but that they had not been. People requested mental health rounds be conducted on C-Grade wing as they are supposed to be done weekly on restrictive housing. JHA agrees that this would be good practice since it is similarly isolating, or even more so.

People in this area reported various other issues, e.g., being refused an available lower bunk despite having a medical permit, not being allowed showers, not being allowed ice, and mold on a mattress. In this area food was reported to be delivered cold. As mentioned above, multiple people reported food in this area was limited punitively, e.g., *“Please investigate the use of torture tactics imposed on inmates by all staff in this prison in addition on the C-grade deck tier 1-A which is where I am housed at the officers use food as a weapon often denying inmates to go to chow hall for petty reasons like looking at a officer in the face.”* People reported that people who advanced to B-Grade were not moved off the unit.

Due to concerns regarding discrimination received as discussed above, JHA asked for and received some information regarding use of C-Grade housing by race from Western administrators for April 1 to August 1, 2023.



JHA also requested additional data regarding length of stay in C-Grade housing, accumulation of new tickets vs. time cuts, etc. More information would be required for proper review for disparity. **JHA again advised that IDOC should be tracking use of grade restrictions by race** under [Administrative Directive 1.2.350](#), which is intended to help reduce disparate impact. **JHA reiterated that we would like to further discuss why IDOC thinks use of C-Grade units, which we have observed to be highly problematic, is successful or a good idea, and where they are supposed to fit in the use of a progressive discipline scheme.** Western administrators did not provide additional data other than the race data presented above, but indicated they were open to further discussion.

## PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITY

*They Try To Bring programs, The staff Do Try*

*Staying outta trouble counts now, A little more programs.*

Despite some positive comments regarding opportunities for productive activity, JHA continued to hear from people at Western the same thing we hear from people throughout IDOC: there are too few opportunities. As noted above, 79% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents



reported they had neither a work or school assignment and administrators reported that 64% of Western's population was unassigned.

*[Suggestion for improvement] Have programs that we can get in. I've been here almost 4 years and only been in one program that was only 3 hours long for one day.*

*Long-timers and Lifers have nothing to look forward to except the TV channels. More Professional Programming would be a reward in itself for them.*

*This prison need to give more individuals an opportunity to get good time through school and work instead of only employing their informants.*

Many people at Western reported that they would like to work or be in school. People felt work assignments were reserved for a few, e.g., “snitches.” Additionally, people reported they are precluded from having jobs for six months after restrictive housing placement and that such discipline is commonly given, and given without proper review of evidence. People reported that individuals with sex offenses were not given jobs, which JHA believes is supposed to be considered on a case-by-case basis and not automatically preclude people based on offense. Likewise, people continued to report JHA that they were given higher escape risk designations for ancient and irrelevant conduct, sometimes after they had previously been classified lower risk by IDOC elsewhere, which limits their ability to engage in constructive activity.

*This is the only prison to keep me classified as a Blue ID for a 400 Level infraction which occurred [15+] yrs ago. I've been to several institutions which cleared my ID. It affects my ability for certain work details and possible work camps & work release.*

Some people expressed that they did not like that housing was changed in relation to job assignments and felt housing moves were stressful or a disincentive to partake in work. People with assignments reported they are not offered alternative recreation time during which they could do things like shower or use the phone when their assignment schedule conflicted with their housing unit's opportunities.

*A person should not be punished for trying to rehabilitate himself to useful citizenship, by making him choose between his health and education. There's no in the middle. For example*

*today 3-31-23 you have 30 individuals come from school and we are suppose to get a shower, but because we came back to the unit at 2:30 some individuals will have to wait until next shift.*

*Next shift then in return says its first shift job to get the showers down so everyday several people miss showers just because the officers are lazy!*

Western administrators again shared that they were in discussions for future collaboration with [DOT Foods](#), which is the prison's neighbor. **JHA again opined that this partnership seems a natural fit at Western for possible workforce development**, noting that CDL training inside would be positive and that warehouse training and certifications for [Illinois Correctional Industry](#) (ICI) programming made sense. Over the past few years ICI has been underutilized in IDOC, depriving people in custody of some of the best skill-building, certificate-conveying, highest prison wages, and best sentencing credit opportunities that have been historically available in Illinois prisons.

As at other prisons, JHA noted that the [CAT simulator](#) program seemed positive but that the low number of participants (4) should be improved. Additionally, some participants had to be transported over from Clayton Work Camp, using scarce staff and vehicle resources. Western administrators responded, *"We do plan to increase this slightly at some point. However, ICI is currently in a transitional stage and we are waiting to see what the restructure will look like before we make any changes. As this is only a 45 day contract it is a fast moving program. With some of the upcoming vocational opportunities [...] the simulators will be just a small but vital piece of the programming will be able to provide."*

People again commonly reported they had too short or too long left to serve to be able to partake in education.

*Nothing because even though they have classes here that can help you, if your sentence is short they tell you that you can not get into classes because you only have two years left on your sentence in other words the waiting list is to long*

*I'm not a priority for school or work because of my life sentence.*

*Because I have time on paper to do I'm not able to go to school. But I'm also up for juvenile parole in 2025 But the IDOC wont allow me to help myself.*

61% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents disagreed their time at the prison seems like a chance to make positive changes.

At the time of the June 2023 JHA visit, Western had just one teacher for 1,700 people and no Education Facility Administrator (EFA); however, the prison was in the process of hiring. Administrators responded to JHA visit follow up asking about the status of this situation in August 2023 stating that they had offered the EFA position and had an additional educator with a start date and two undergoing background checks. As of August 2023, [IDOC public reporting](#) showed 90 people at Western (about 5% of the population) in educational or vocational classes and 4,030 people total in IDOC prisons (about 13%) in such classes.

**JHA advised that we remain very concerned about how IDOC is not targeting illiteracy.** At Western more than 400 people (about a quarter of the population) were reported to have scored below a 5.5 on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) meaning they would be mandated be in school, but they were unlikely to be able to attend due to long waitlists. Further, not everyone in IDOC is TABE tested.

Please write any other comments or feedback on this survey below.

This Jail need more help to help the brothers out that don't know how to read or write and to help them out with they case. they need more outside HELP

Additionally, we were concerned that IDOC had not been able to facilitate proctoring for correspondence courses at Western and asked for an update after the visit, noting that other facilities have used religious volunteers and even administrators have helped out.

*College and outside courses require a proctor and we are denied this.*

Western administrators responded in August 2023, “We have had people volunteer individually for this but we have not been able to find anyone willing to provide the services to everyone. We have reached out to IRI and JCC to see if there proctors would travel to WIL and they refused. Our Chaplain has been working to find a new volunteer.” It is not a huge commitment to proctor

exams a few times a year, but it has big potential cost savings with sentence credit application. JHA remains confident that if IDOC asked for assistance with this matter, it could be resolved. We have offered to reach out to our network previously, but we were told this was not needed.

People wanted more library hours. At the time of the visit, JHA noted that when the library was open it was only open at best three hours a day and inquired why that was, since it was reportedly staffed. Western administrators responded, *"The Library is open daily when the academic building is staffed with security. We are currently in the process of making modifications to the schedule to allow more time for the individuals to be more productive."* People also reported that library kiosks used for legal research frequently froze or malfunctioned and time to use them was too limited. Increasing legal research through tablets would be an improvement but we understand that IDOC first must obtain a better tablet contract and ensure connectivity issues are resolved. Some people noted that the library selection was not great and JHA suggested the prison partner with some of the books to prison projects. People at Western also wanted more access to art supplies to productively pass the time. This has been a reported issue at other prisons.

As noted above, people wanted substance use disorder and other treatment programming and reiterated that it does not make sense to make people wait until they are close to release to address these needs.

*I wish it would offer programming in the area of Domestic violence and sex offender crimes. These things are only offered at minimum prisons and are out of reach for us long timers.*

## INCENTIVE WING

*Now that the Incentive Wing is starting (it's still in "rollout" mode) I can make small positive contributions in groups or other programs ... And some staff try to be good people.*

*They just started an Incentive wing/Honor wing but a lot of officers make it Hard because they want it to Fail, but am going to do my best to Keep positive + make this work.*

*They recently opened a Honor dorm that gives me access to programming and a extra gym. It is supposed to make things better for the people on the wing. It has yet to be seen.*

71% of 2023 Western MQPL survey respondents reported that to improve their situation they would have to meet impossible expectations and 61% felt they could not improve their situation through good behavior.

Western had created an incentive wing, which JHA commends. However, we noted that some individuals had remarkable lengths of time without any discipline (e.g., 20 years) and it seemed like it was probably more appropriate for them to be reclassified to a lower-level facility than to remain at Western.

People were positive about the housing and looked forward to more programming being developed. In particular, some people were eager to act as mentors to others, such as the individuals in the C-Grade wing which was located in the same X-house housing unit. JHA supports use of peer mentorship.

Some people mentioned a good thing about the housing unit was not being celled with people with really short time or other incompatible people as elsewhere at Western.

A few participants expressed that they felt staff opposed this initiative. Some people noted that they are often threatened with removal from the program. For example, someone was told not to file grievances or he would be removed, which JHA advised was totally inappropriate. We were told that the message not to file grievances was contradicted and corrected by another staff member, which we were glad to hear, but the damage had been done in that this person felt he would be retaliated against.

People housed in the incentive wing reported, as with most people in Western general population, that they too needed more time out-of-cell than 1.5 hours a day.



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](mailto:jvollen@thejha.org)

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff read every letter and track 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](http://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.

