Executive Summary: 
Monitoring Visit to Decatur Correctional Center
4/12/2011


Vital Statistics
Population: 675
Design Capacity: 500
Operational Capacity: 719
Average Annual Cost Per Inmate: $38,171
Average Length of Stay: 8 months
Average age of Inmate: 36
Source: IDOC 4/12/2011

Key Observations

• Approximately 85 percent of Decatur’s inmates are mothers.

• Decatur is the home of Moms and Babies, a program that allows specially screened pregnant inmates to live with and care for their babies while serving their sentence. Since the program started in 2007, no inmate who has completed the program has returned to prison.

• Like most of Illinois’ prisons, Decatur lacks adequate programming. In particular, the facility is having problems providing inmates with substance abuse treatment.

• Decatur is one of a small handful of Illinois prisons that offers video visitation.
The John Howard Association visited Decatur Correctional Center (Decatur) on April 12, 2011. Decatur is Illinois’ Minimum-Security women’s prison. The facility was designed to house 500 inmates, but has an operational capacity of 719, comprised of 696 general population beds, 16 segregation beds, and seven medical unit beds.\(^1\) The average age of inmates at Decatur is 38. Also of significance, 85 percent of the inmates are mothers.

Decatur opened in 2000 after the building was converted from a mental health facility. Inmates must have less than eight years remaining on their sentence to be housed at the facility.

The population on the day of JHA’s visit was 675, which represents a significant increase over the past year. In February 2010, the population was around 400 inmates. Since April 2010, the facility has added 74 general population beds to meet the demands of the increased number of offenders. This increase is mostly due to the suspension of Meritorious Good Time (MGT). As a result, offenders are serving longer terms and have difficulty participating in programs that would offer them opportunities to earn time off their sentence.

The increased population is creating a number of problems for the facility. Some of these problems stem from the fact that contracts with service providers were finalized when the population was significantly smaller. Therefore, the contracts are based on serving a number of inmates that no longer represents the actual need. As such, the wait lists for programs are longer than Decatur can accommodate.

Most of the general population resides in multiple-occupancy cells with either four or eight beds. All of the segregation beds are in double cells. There are two single cells and two double cells in the health care unit. The only other single and double cells are used in conjunction with the Moms and Babies and Reunification programs discussed below.

Decatur is the designated ADA (American With Disability Act) facility for the women’s division. The entire facility is housed in one building, with the exception of industries, and is all one level, which makes it appropriate for disabled inmates. Many of the rooms

\(^1\) For Decatur’s rated/design capacity, see Illinois Department of Corrections Quarterly Report: January 1, 2011, pg. 4. (http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/reports/default.shtml) In the same report, IDOC defines operational capacity as “the maximum number of inmates a facility can hold.”
are ADA accessible, and some inmates are approved for low bunk orders or for a room close to the showers.

During our visit, the administration emphasized the importance of rehabilitation. As the warden said, “We do not think it is our job to punish the inmates—being taken away from their families is punishment enough—our job is to do the best we can to make sure they never have to come back here.”

**Visitation**

Visitation is extremely important at Decatur since 85 percent of the inmates are mothers. The administration has made an effort to prioritize visits from children. This effort is evident in the quality and frequency of visits.

The visitation area at Decatur is significantly larger and more welcoming than at most IDOC facilities. The room is brightly lit and spacious, and there is a connected outdoor visitation area with tables. Another feature worth mentioning is the designated “Kids Corner” area that has toys and is decorated with a Mickey Mouse mural.

Inmates are allowed up to eight visits per month, not including attorney or clergy visits, for up to five hours per visit. The visits are restricted to four adult visitors at a time, but there is no limit on the number of children that may visit at a time. Inmates who are in segregation or put on no-contact visits are allowed two visits per month for up to an hour, and these visits are only allowed on the weekdays.

Decatur is more than a three-hour drive from Chicago, which can make visiting difficult for inmates who come from Cook and its surrounding collar counties. There are, however, a number of options to help bridge this gap. First, Lutheran Social Services brings a bus of children to Decatur from Chicago on the second Saturday of every month. This is an invaluable service for many of the mothers. Second, video visitation is available through the Women’s Treatment Center in Chicago. Third, inmates have access to the phones from 7:00 AM to 9:30 PM daily. Although phone calls are not a particularly affordable option, they can play a crucial role in maintaining familial bonds, which is why JHA supports giving inmates as much access to phones as possible.

**Medical and Mental Health**

The mental health and infirmary are in a joint area. When JHA visited the healthcare unit, there were about 10 inmates waiting to see nurses. The inmates come to the healthcare unit to get their medications unless the facility is on lockdown.

Decatur has one authorized physician, but she recently resigned after spending several weeks on a leave of absence. A visiting physician currently provides about 24 hours of service per week. With such limited physician coverage, the doctor is only able to serve
inmates who have the most serious issues. Therefore, most patients do not see a doctor at all and are treated by the nurses.

This situation has increased the nurses’ workload. Decatur is authorized for 10 nurses and currently has nine. The open physician position has been posted, but it is unclear when it will actually be filled. All of the nurses at the facility are state employees. Nurses conduct the daily sick call and nursing coverage is 24/7. One health care staff member told JHA that things have been “really difficult” in the past year because of the vacancies and increased population.

Decatur is authorized for one dentist. The dentist used to be full-time, but since August the dentist has worked one day every other week for about 10 hours. Unsurprisingly, the waitlist to see the dentist is extraordinarily long: 255 inmates are waiting to see the dentist. The facility is also authorized for a part-time dental hygienist, but does not have one. The facility does have a full-time dental assistant, but it is questionable how much the assistant can do when there is no dentist or hygienist to assist.

A gynecologist who spends 120 hours at the facility annually serves inmates’ gynecological needs. There is currently no waitlist to see the gynecologist. In emergency situations, inmates are taken to Decatur Memorial Hospital.

At the time of JHA’s visit, the psychiatrist and psychologist positions were fully staffed. There were 143 inmates under psychiatric care, 108 of whom were on psychotropic medication. As of May 1, 2011, the psychiatrist retired, and all psychiatric needs are now being met through telepsychiatry. Decatur has implemented both telespsychiatry and telemedicine to makeup for some of medical vacancies. Telemedicine and telepsychiatry use live video technology to allow an offsite physician or psychiatrist to treat the inmates. This technique is relatively new, but there is talk of relying on it more as a cost-cutting measure.

Telespsychiatry was previously used at Decatur when the psychiatrist was on leave with mixed reviews. On the one hand, the patients were seen, and it allowed continued services when there may have otherwise been a gap. On the other hand, the psychiatrist felt that most of the medications that had been prescribed needed to be adjusted when she returned, which implies inconsistent care. The psychologist also mentioned that there have been some scheduling difficulties with telemedicine.

JHA is in favor of finding cost-effective ways to provide services in prisons, but believes that more data should be collected on the quality of treatment provided by telemedicine and telespsych before it is more widely implemented.

*Recommendation: Decatur requires more dental coverage immediately. The number of authorized nurse positions should be increased to reflect the increased population.*
Moms and Babies

Moms and Babies is a pilot program at Decatur that allows some babies to live with their moms in the facility. The program began in 2007 with the goal of helping inmates bond with their newborns, teaching them how to become better parents, and encouraging successful reentry. In the four years that the program has been up and running, 27 women have gone through the program, and none have returned to prison.

The Moms and Babies program only selects pregnant inmates who volunteer for the program and have less than 24 months on their sentence after their due date. A variety of risk factors are considered before a woman is enrolled in the program. For example, women with violent pasts or prior issues with Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) are screened out. In special circumstances, women who have more than two years to serve after their due date, but are otherwise strong candidates may be enrolled and then go to the women’s treatment center in Chicago for up to two years, where their other children can join them.

Currently, the facility has space for eight moms and eight babies. On the day of JHA’s visit there were four moms and three babies (one mother was pregnant) in the program. Two more pregnant women were being interviewed for possible placement.

The program runs at no additional cost to the state. In large part this is possible because of donations and volunteers. But the program also takes advantage of the resources the mothers would have if they were not incarcerated. For example, each of the mothers receives a Link card and a staff member takes all of the Link cards to do necessary shopping at Walmart twice a week.

It took seven years to start Moms and Babies. Staff looked at other programs around the country for direction and then tried to improve upon them. One thing that is different about Decatur’s program is that at no point in time are the mother and baby separated—the baby stays with the mother until she is released.

Fathers are encouraged to visit the babies, but they are not allowed to take the babies out of the facility because Decatur is responsible for them. Before mothers enter the program, the fathers must sign a waiver giving permission for the child to live in the facility. Importantly, the babies are kept separate from the general population at all times. The vast majority of the time the babies stay on their mother’s wing. All people on that wing have gone through special clearance to be allowed near the babies. On the instances when the babies go elsewhere in the facility, the movement of the other inmates is controlled so that there is no interaction.

Aside from the mothers, there are some other inmates who live on E wing, which houses the Moms and Babies program. One such group is inmates whose job assignment is caregiver. These inmates care for the babies while their mothers are on job assignments, go to school, or participate in treatment programs. The caregivers must pass the special
screening, want to work and live with the children, and complete care-giving training. According to the assistant warden, there is always a waitlist of inmates who want to either be caregivers or live on E wing. At the time of JHA’s visit, there were approximately 16 caregivers and other general population inmates living in E wing.

E wing also houses the Reunification program. This program enables children to visit their mother at least once a week in their housing unit instead of the visitation area. Some of these children are able to take part in this program because of a service provided by Lutheran Social Services, a program that brings children from Chicago to Decatur once a month.

The Moms and Babies rooms are individual cells with a crib. The mom and baby share a bathroom with one other mom and baby. The Reunification rooms are double cells on the E wing. The general population cells on E wing have four beds. All of the rooms with babies have cameras in them, and the video can be viewed by the warden, assistant wardens, and designated staff.

The walls on the wing are covered in all kinds of artwork and paintings, including seasonal decorations. All of the artwork is children friendly and includes Little Mermaid, Scooby Doo, and multicultural murals. There are also plastic bookshelves with children’s books and toys scattered around the wing. Another nice touch: there are pictures of all 26 babies that have been born in the program. All but one of the children was born healthy. This baby received special therapy and made great progress while in the program.

Unlike other prison wings, there is a kitchen on E wing where mothers can prepare bottles and store some additional food for themselves given their special dietary needs. Typically, however, the mothers eat meals with the rest of the population.

The wing resembles a day care center more than the typical prison day room. In some ways you could almost forget that you are in a prison, but then there are little reminders. For example, one mother wanted to take her baby outside and first had to get sunscreen for her baby from the correction officer on duty. The outdoor space on E wing has two swing sets and a slide.

During the course of the program, the mothers acquire various supplies for the babies. The mothers each leave with a stroller and a car seat for their baby.

During our visit JHA interviewed an expectant mother who came to the program the previous week and was 22 months pregnant. She seemed extremely positive about the program and her situation. She was reading a book about pregnancy and what to expect. She said that she was nervous because she has only held a baby once before in her life. She was not allowed to hold the other babies on the wing yet because she had not completed the care-giving classes. She said that she had seen the doctor once since arriving at Decatur, and it was the same doctor who would be doing the delivery.
Ultrasounds for the women are performed at the hospital. According to the warden, the women are not shackled when they are transported to the hospital. The facility does not have a pediatrician on staff, so the babies go for checkups outside of the facility.

To date, Decatur has not had an incident where a mother in the program was put in disciplinary segregation. That said, the mothers occasionally get tickets and are disciplined like other inmates. The program was placed on lock down once when the administration asked for a shake down of the facility. During the shake down, staff went with the babies in a separate room while the mothers were searched so that the babies would not see them in distress.

The facility recently received a federal Second Chance grant that will be used to expand the Reunification and Moms & Babies programs. The grant will help fund more programming and reentry services.

**Programming**

On the whole, the inmates that JHA interviewed had fewer complaints than at most facilities. The most common grievance was in regard to the lack of programming and the length of wait lists, particularly for the Wells Center, the facility’s substance abuse program. One problem with so few vocational and educational opportunities is that it limits inmates’ ability to earn time off of their sentences.

Limited programming is available for inmates who have either the longest or shortest remaining time on their sentences. Those with the longest sentences will spend more time on waiting lists because the administration gives priority to inmates who will be released sooner. At the same time, inmates with the shortest sentences often do not have enough time to complete programs and therefore are not enrolled to allow space for inmates who will be able to complete the program. Administration is looking for ways to expand the programming options for these inmates.

The facility has a large auditorium for performances and movies. The indoor gym area serves many purposes, including church on Sundays. The area fits about 300 chairs and is the largest available space. The gym had a volleyball net up while JHA visited and there are also basketball hoops.

**Substance Abuse Treatment**

The Wells Center and Seeking Safety Group provide Decatur’s substance abuse treatment programming. The treatment inmates receive is equivalent to intensive outpatient treatment. Inmates in the Wells program have treatment Monday through Friday for three hours a day. Each inmate receives at least two individual sessions per month in addition to the group treatment.
The waiting list for the Wells Center is the longest waitlist at the facility; 120 inmates are enrolled in the program and a staggering 262 are on the waitlist. This number includes many inmates who were court ordered to complete substance abuse treatment. At more than double the enrollment, inmates can potentially spend years on the waitlist before they are finally enrolled. JHA spoke with one inmate who had been on the waitlist for 21 months. Not only did this woman want substance abuse treatment, but it was also part of her mandated sentence. Another problem with such a long waitlist is that it prevents inmates who are eligible to earn time off of their sentence by completing drug treatment programming.

The 120 inmates enrolled in Wells treatment live on B, C, and E wings. The Wells Unit also houses some overflow general population inmates. This living situation creates some issues because the daily routines of enrolled and non-enrolled inmates are different. Therefore, Decatur’s administration tries to keep the inmates separated during the day. The day room in the Wells Unit is separate from the Wells treatment area, which helps to make this setup feasible. This is in contrast to many IDOC facilities where the day room also serves as the meeting area for group treatment.

There are six counselors in the Wells Center, but two were out on medical leave when JHA visited. One of those counselors had been out since February of 2011. The counselors are required to complete 40 hours of training every two years, and the staff has quality improvement meetings every year. The curriculum is gender specific, trauma-informed, and evidence based. One counselor pointed out the significance of the inmates being in an all-female program. When inmates go to treatment in the community they are often with men, whereas at Decatur they are able to get truly gender-specific treatment. This is important because the triggers that lead women to substance abuse are typically different than for men.

The Wells Center program is six months long, but some inmates stay longer. For example, IV methamphetamine users may stay in the program for two years because that is what the research recommends. Many inmates do not want to leave the program once they have completed the six months. Although it is a good thing that inmates like the program and find it effective, this is problematic because of the limited number of spots available. Administration relayed one story about an inmate who spent three years in the Wells program, and her drug of choice was alcohol. Eventually the administration made the decision to take her out of the program to make room for other inmates. This anecdote, along with the long waitlist, highlights the need to expand the Wells program.

Recommendation: Expand the Wells program to accommodate Decatur’s population increase.

Education

Decatur offers adult basic education (ABE) classes, general educational development (GED) classes, and college level classes. There are currently 69 inmates enrolled in the
two ABE courses offered. Currently, there are 20 inmates on the waitlist, but a class of 35 inmates is already above the ideal class size. Last year 72 inmates completed the ABE course. Sixty inmates are currently enrolled in the three GED classes, for an average class size of 20 inmates. Only seven inmates are on the waitlist. Last year 47 inmates earned their GED.

When we visited one of the GED classrooms, a life skills class was in progress and the class was watching *Imitation of Life*. Although the classroom has computers, the server for the computers is currently down. Similarly, there is a computer room with 17 computers that is not being used because the funding for the vocational course has been eliminated. According to administration, when the course was offered it was extremely popular.

Classes are offered toward an Associates degree in Liberal Studies or a Certificate in Improving Family Circumstances. Between 10 and 15 classes are offered per year. Fourteen students earned the Certificate in Improving Family Circumstances in fiscal year 2010, and 126 students participated in the College Academic Program. These courses are offered at the college’s cost. The college also offers a College Job Preparedness Program to all inmates who are nearing release. In fiscal year 2010, 176 inmates completed this program.

**Vocation**

The only full-time vocational program that Decatur currently offers is in food service. The program is full-time and takes 32 weeks for an inmate to earn the certificate. In fiscal year 2010, 59 students participated in the program and 25 earned the certificate. Those students generated 661 credit hours that will be reimbursed to IDOC via the College contract to offset program costs.

The food preparation program meets Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 3:00 PM with an hour for lunch. One inmate JHA interviewed mentioned that she had been on the waiting list for seven months before getting into the food preparation program. The inmates earn credit toward a contract for time off of their sentence while in the program.

Decatur used to offer other vocational programs, including a Commercial Custodial Services Program and a Vocation Technical Math course, but those courses have been cut due to funding issues. The lack of vocation options was a common complaint from the inmates.

The facility has a greenhouse, but because there is no longer a horticulture program, it was not being used at the time of our visit. The assistant warden plans to plant vegetables and flowers in the greenhouse and create a job assignment position in the greenhouse this spring.
Industries

In 2010, some of the industries were transferred from Decatur to Lincoln Correctional Center to allow the sewing line at Decatur to expand. Decatur Correctional Industries is now strictly devoted to sewing, specialized sewing, outside repair, and cutting of the components for the garments they produce. The sewing line makes work-wear clothing, safety clothing, and various accessories. The site performs all of its own cutting. While the significance of this may not be obvious, one inmate who JHA spoke to was the head of cutting and was very proud of this fact.

Although most of the clothing made at Decatur is produced for state departments, such as the Department of Transportation, inmates recently designed and assembled clothing for the TV program, *The Chicago Code*.

Currently 38 have jobs at the industry. The supervisor indicated that more positions might open up once the state’s financial position improves. On the day of JHA’s visit, it was approximately 65 degrees outside, and it was already fairly warm in the warehouse-type building that houses the sewing shop. Inmates gave varying reports on how bad the heat becomes in the summer. One inmate said that it was “literally a sweatshop,” while another inmate said that it was “hot but not unbearable”. JHA encourages Decatur to bring in additional fans to help with the heat.

Other Observations

Beauty Shop

The beauty salon resembles an actual salon complete with a waiting area with magazines, six chairs for hair cutting and styling, four sinks, and three large hair dryers. The salon was very clean.

The inmates come to the beauty shop every four to six weeks for haircuts. The inmates come in for facials or hair removal as needed. The inmates can also have perms or releasers done on their hair. They must purchase the chemicals in commissary, and they then receive a receipt for the purchase, not the chemicals themselves, which they must bring into the beauty salon. The only service the beauty salon does not perform is hair dyeing.

The hairdresser has been working at the facility since it opened and says that she loves her job. She currently supervises nine inmates who work at the shop. She said that many of the women who work there come to the facility already having had training. She demands that everyone get along.
Library

At Decatur, the law library and general library are in adjoining rooms. Each inmate has an assigned time that they can come into the library. The current librarian came to the facility in August of 2010 and has since implemented an electronic card catalogue system, an improvement that administration seemed proud of. Two inmates work as clerks in the library.

Physical Plant

The facility was built in 1967. On the whole, the building is clean and in good order. JHA did observe a number of broken windows. The windows were designed for a mental health institute, and therefore are not double paneled or as sturdy as would be ideal. Boarded up or breakable windows at an IDOC facility present a number of safety issues. JHA recommends that these windows be replaced with more durable glass.

The facility also has a number of leaking pipes. The pipes are not a normal size and replacement parts must be special ordered. Further delaying repairs, the water for the entire facility must be turned off to fix the pipes. These issues mean that the pipes take longer to fix than they should.

Segregation

The segregation cells are set up with double beds, but they typically only put one inmate in a cell. The cells have small rectangular windows that allow some natural light in and the cells are a decent size. Inmates cannot control the light in their cells. The inmates’ property is stored outside of the cell on shelves. While they are in segregation, the inmates use a different size comb and toothbrush than when they are in general population.

Inmates in segregation may shower daily. Inmates are allowed five hours of recreation time per week in a large concrete outdoor area that is fenced off with barbed wire. Television privileges are withheld. Visitation and commissary privileges are limited. Inmates are allowed to go to commissary on Fridays. Telephone privileges are withheld for the first thirty days.

When JHA visited the segregation unit, one inmate was pacing back and forth in her cell and crying. She said that she was under investigation and did not know why. She also said that her mother had recently died and she was upset because she was unable to speak with anyone in her family. The warden told the inmate that she would send a staff member down to speak with her, but also told JHA that it was unlikely that the inmate did not know why she was being investigated. It seemed that communication with the inmates in segregation could be improved, particularly in contrast to the general population inmates who seemed to have good relations with the administration and staff.
The most time inmates will spend in segregation at Decatur is 30 days. If an inmate’s segregation time exceeds 30 days, the inmate will ultimately be transferred to a different facility with a higher security level.

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This report was written by Angela Weis, Counsel & Policy Analyst, for the John Howard Association. Angela may be reached at (312) 503-6302 or angela.m.weis@gmail.com.

Contributing to this report was JHA Citizen Observers Andrea Kampfner, Jessica Peller, Grace Warren and John Maki, Executive Director, for the John Howard Association of Illinois.

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.