

---

## **The Need for Public Health Involvement in Prisons: from Pandemic to Pontiac Fever Statement of the John Howard Association September 11, 2020**

Yesterday the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) and the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) issued a [statement](#) about a joint investigation of two cases of Legionnaires' disease at the Pontiac Correctional Center. The Departments note that "IDPH infectious disease staff are working with the facility to collect information and further investigate the illnesses while environmental health staff are conducting a water quality assessment" and that "the facility receives its water from the City of Pontiac and will begin a water quality testing program through an outside laboratory to monitor water quality data on an ongoing basis." It is important that these steps be taken to stem the spread of disease inside the prison and in the community; however the implication that such proactive precautions and basic protections were not in place to identify and rectify the proliferation of the bacteria in the water and/or air supply prior to evidence of serious illness is profoundly disturbing.

Earlier this week, prior to the announcement of cases of Legionnaires' disease at Pontiac, the Executive Director of the John Howard Association (JHA) [pointed out](#) the fundamental problem of the health of people in prison not being included in how public health is defined or protected, and the need for IDPH and local health departments to inspect and report on compliance with health and safety regulations in prisons in the same way that hospitals, restaurants and other public and private places are routinely monitored for compliance or violation of the standards set out by the agencies.

[According to the CDC](#), "*Legionella*, the bacteria found in the disease, can grow if water is not properly maintained and manmade water sources become a health problem when small droplets of water that contain the bacteria get into the air and people breathe them in." [Other health experts note](#) that, "the likelihood of Legionella infection can be best reduced by good engineering practices in the operation and maintenance of air and water handling systems." It is clear that in order to reduce the risk of this bacteria infecting people, adequate and maintained air filtration and water management systems have to be in place. For decades in Illinois a varied and vigilant group of stakeholders have noted the [horrible conditions inside most of Illinois' prisons](#), with ventilation and water quality being cited as specific problems over and over with no corrective action taken or enforced.

Through decades of deferred maintenance due to required resources not being provided to properly maintain the Agency's aging and decrepit facilities and without any input or oversight from the agencies entrusted with ensuring public health, prisons like Pontiac have been left to decay and deteriorate, leading to inhumane conditions. This must end. The health and safety of the people in our prisons is part of our larger public health. Prisons should not be exempt from the standards set for other institutions; they should be scrutinized even more closely given the closed nature of these facilities.

That this disease would be present at Pontiac given that it is sometimes referred to as “Pontiac fever” would be ironic if it wasn’t so horrible. COVID-19 has laid bare the impossibility prisoners face in attempting self-protective measures to avoid disease and attempt to maintain health. In the immediate, the state must reduce the number of people in our prisons, improve the precautions and care of people in prison, and provide more information about what is happening inside the prisons. This includes allowing for more communication between people in prison and their loved ones via phone and video, as well as publicly reporting the number of COVID-19 tests performed and hospitalizations and fatalities due to the virus. IDOC and IDPH should proactively share the findings of their investigation into the Legionnaires’ at Pontiac and explain what they will do to ensure such incidents do not recur.

Illinois must confront the horrible conditions presented by decrepit and decaying prisons, and regulation and inspection by health authorities must become routine inside correctional facilities. The health and safety of the people in prison matters; changes must be made pursuant to the involvement of IDPH and local health departments to ensure protection for people who are incarcerated. Prison health is public health.

---

---

For more information about the John Howard Association please visit our website, [www.thejha.org](http://www.thejha.org). Please direct media inquiries to Jennifer Vollen-Katz, [jvollen@thejha.org](mailto:jvollen@thejha.org), 312-291-9183 ext. 205