
Facility Report



Monitoring Visit to Kewanee Life Skills Reentry Center 2023

JHA January 18, 2023 Visit to Kewanee: Key Observations and Updates

Kewanee Life Skills Reentry Center (Kewanee) is a multi-security level male prison that provides incarcerated people with reentry-focused programming. JHA's last report on Kewanee was published in [2018](#) and our last visit was pre-pandemic in July 2019. In addition to speaking to people at Kewanee during the January 2023 visit, JHA also received input close in time to the visit via responses to a survey, which is adapted from the University of Cambridge's "[Measuring the Quality of Prison Life](#)" (MQPL) survey. As of March 2023, JHA had received 36 surveys from people incarcerated in Kewanee, which is a response rate of approximately 18%. JHA is conducting this survey systemwide in IDOC and also surveying staff. We intend to publish a fuller analysis of surveys in the future.

Kewanee administrators have some discretion over who may transfer to Kewanee and stated that they take a holistic approach to approving transfers. However, most individuals who transfer to Kewanee are 3-7 years from release and have received no major tickets in the past year. Some exceptions are made, such as for individuals who have life sentences but may be eligible for parole. Most of the population at Kewanee reportedly had initial sentences of 15 years or more. Offense classes for the population included 15% Murder and 43% Class X. Although Kewanee is a "multi-level" security facility, no one who was currently classified as maximum security or as higher escape risk was housed at the facility, and 97% of the population were classified as minimum security. People who have been incarcerated for long periods—especially those who have been incarcerated from a young age—often need to learn skills such as work-readiness and financial literacy in order to be successful post-release.

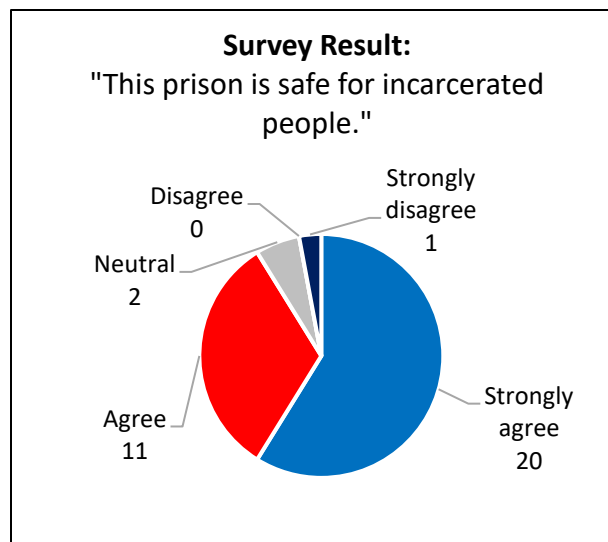
At the time of JHA's visit, Kewanee had a population of 193, which is less than 1% of the [total IDOC male prison population](#). This represents a significant decrease from Kewanee's pre-pandemic [average daily population](#) of 275, but an increase from Kewanee's lowest recorded [average daily population](#) during the pandemic of 93 in May 2021. The operational capacity or total bedspace capacity of the prison is still [reported as 682](#), although it was unclear whether getting closer to that number was achievable. Kewanee is composed of two sides with three housing units each. During the visit, two of the six housing units were in use. One side of the prison with three units had not been open since Kewanee became an adult prison. On the open side, one unit was reportedly closed at the height of the COVID pandemic when the prison's

population was reduced. However, administrative staff stated during May 2023 draft review that they planned to reopen this third housing unit and create more bedspace soon, noting that they had been able to do some physical plant repair and that more staff had been hired since the visit. **JHA continues to recommend that IDOC maximize the use of lower-security and more programmatic bedspace that provide access to more productive activity, rehabilitative opportunities, and freedom of movement.**



Satellite Image of Kewanee

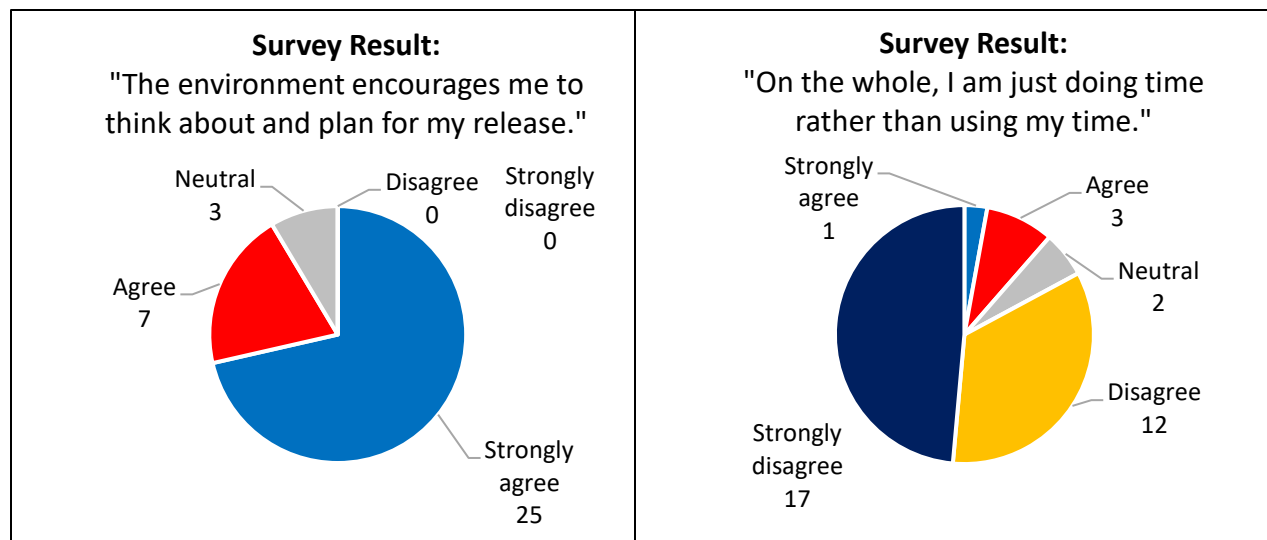
Kewanee was an Illinois Youth Center run by the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice until the closure of that facility in June 2016, which JHA had recommended. JHA also supported repurposing the facility for adults, partially because it has a newer and better physical plant than most adult prisons in Illinois. Kewanee has a large quad with a central building where programming, meals, gym, and other communal activities take place. There are indoor and outdoor gyms, a baseball/kickball field, and two community gardens. JHA again noted during our 2023 visit that Kewanee appeared to be in better physical condition than most IDOC prisons.



There is A/C throughout the prison, which is rare in IDOC, and staff reported that there were seldom issues with mold and pests. Administrators stated that Legionella had been detected in three water sources at Kewanee in 2022, and they were in the process of flushing and re-testing these water sources. This was a reported issue at several prisons in 2022, including those like Kewanee with newer and better maintained physical plants than other older IDOC prisons. Issues with water are longstanding and commonly reported in IDOC prisons, and JHA [continues to advocate](#) for the health of incarcerated people in addressing water system failures. Testing and mitigating potential harm is a first step. In a survey comment someone at Kewanee wrote, *“The water in the housing units taste bad, especially in the cells.”*

A positive about the facility is that Kewanee has Wi-Fi signal boosters throughout the prison so that everyone reportedly has Wi-Fi in their cells for tablet use, which is uncommon in IDOC. However, some people noted on their surveys that phones were too limited or controlled by others, which led to competition over the few phones available and people again suggested that phones be on tablets. Such issues are often reported in IDOC prisons.

Kewanee aims to prepare individuals in custody for release via reentry preparation programming. Relative to other IDOC prisons, Kewanee appeared to provide individuals in custody with many opportunities to participate in programming and other productive activity. Several of the individuals JHA spoke with highlighted that there were *“ample opportunities”* for things to do, with one stating that he had a *“full schedule.”* Others commented in surveys specifically about *“movement”* as a positive at Kewanee, in contrast to being idly restricted to cells. Several individuals stated during the visit and in surveys that the activity and autonomy to



choose how they spent their time while incarcerated was the most positive part of their experience at Kewanee. People reported that while some programs had long waitlists, there were plenty of other programs and groups that one could join immediately. Several people commented on peer support as a positive. Others felt that those who did not appreciate the opportunities at Kewanee were a negative, e.g., *“People who don't realize what this place means, and how it can change their lives or both sides/staff and us.”* One individual summed up his take on the “most positive” aspects at Kewanee in a survey response: *“Friendly & helpful staff & officers, re-entry education, amount of movement, Day release, Food Quality, commissary daily, Patio access & yard all day, Bigger cells, Hot Water in cells & showers, EPSC & EDSC [sentence credit], Programs & groups, re-entry services.”* A staff member likewise commented about positive aspects of Kewanee in a survey response saying that the “most satisfying” part of the job was *“Interactions with staff and individuals in custody. Being able to help individuals in custody in their re-entry to society. This facility allows for so much outside of the box that it is rewarding.”*

Financial literacy classes were reportedly popular, as were classes and peer-led groups on how to use technology such as smart phones and Microsoft Office. JHA was pleased to see that technology courses were available, as people who have been incarcerated for many years may be unfamiliar with technology that is routinely used during job searches and in work settings. Other class and group offerings focus on topics such as relapse prevention, managing anxiety and trauma, childcare, anger management, and work-readiness. There was a peer-led gardening class, and food grown in the gardens has been used in prison meals and donated to food pantries. Administrative staff said that they were working with an advocacy group to obtain a greenhouse and to potentially begin a horticulture class.

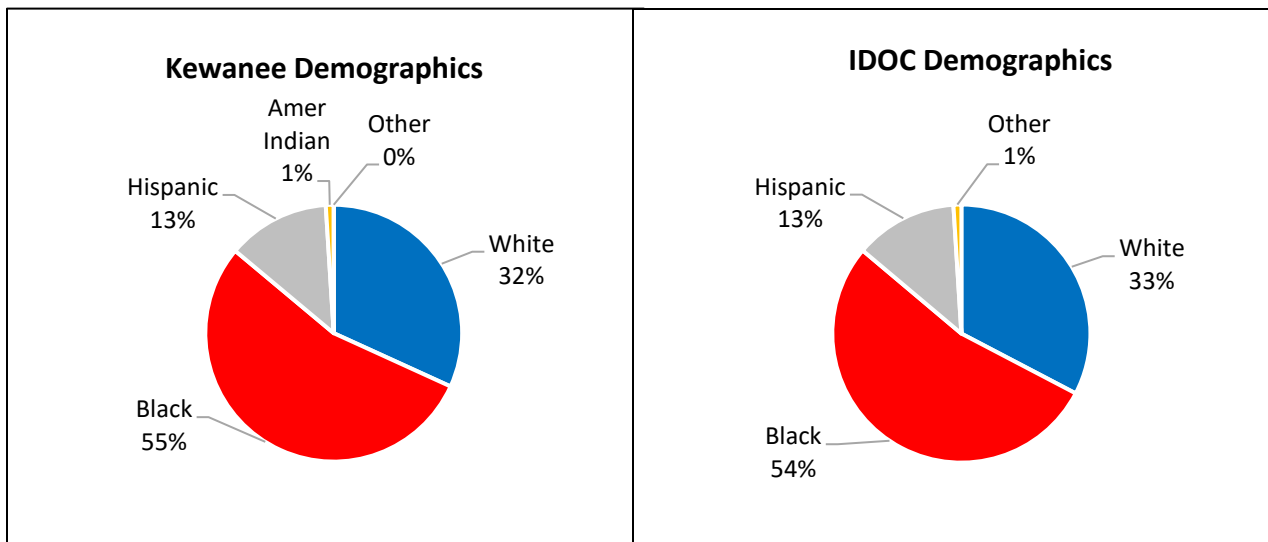
Opportunities for vocational training include a custodial maintenance class, which offered certificates in entrepreneurship, custodial equipment use, and COVID deep-cleaning. The class was given high praise by one of the people JHA spoke with. For a [CAT Simulator](#) course, the prison has backhoe and other simulators where individuals can practice construction skills. There was a classroom that was well-stocked with manufacturing equipment, such as a robotic arm, but administrative staff said they were still looking for a teacher to run the manufacturing class. Vacancies for already limited educational course instruction are commonly reported in IDOC. Several people stated on their surveys that they wished there were more opportunities for vocational training. For example, one person wrote *“We need more programming like*

welding and other trades,” and another individual wrote that Kewanee should have *“more vocational classes that offer living wage jobs upon completion.”*

Since 2019, some individuals in custody at Kewanee participate in day release for work. Per administrative staff, individuals must be at Kewanee for at least a year before participating in day release. Administrative staff stated during May 2023 draft review that they require individuals to complete certain “prerequisites” before they can be accepted for day release, such as obtaining their GED and participating in rehabilitative programming, and that participants in day release typically have less than one year left to serve. Individuals in custody complete a questionnaire about their job skill set upon transfer to Kewanee, which can help determine day release job placement, in addition to security review.

Administrative staff stated during May 2023 draft review that there were four work sites available for day release. At the time of JHA’s visit, nine positions in welding and manufacturing were available at nearby plants, and four were available at the City of Kewanee’s Public Works Department doing grounds work at a cemetery. On the day of the visit, ten individuals were participating in day release and three more were in the process of being hired. Administrative staff stated that they were looking to add four more positions with the City of Kewanee, but the lack of supervising staff limited the number of people they could send out for day release. Administrative staff also said that they only collaborated with employers who paid individuals in custody the same amount as a person in the community, meaning at least Illinois minimum wage of \$13 an hour. Many people in IDOC receive only “state pay” of \$10 a month.

One person at Kewanee reported to JHA during the visit that he believed he was denied a day release job position because he is Black; he said that though he had more relevant job experience than most, he had been denied a position at the nearby plant multiple times. A survey comment stated, *“Bias is still happening between whites and Blacks an who they give the good job, day release, ATC, and even EDSC good in general to.”* **JHA recommends that administrative staff look into discrimination concerns if this issue is raised.** During May 2023 draft review, administrative staff stated that they were unaware of this issue, but they had an “expectation of diversity” for their work crews and regularly discussed whether diversity goals were being achieved. Several people in the comment section of their surveys noted day release was a positive at Kewanee or expressed a desire for more day release opportunity.

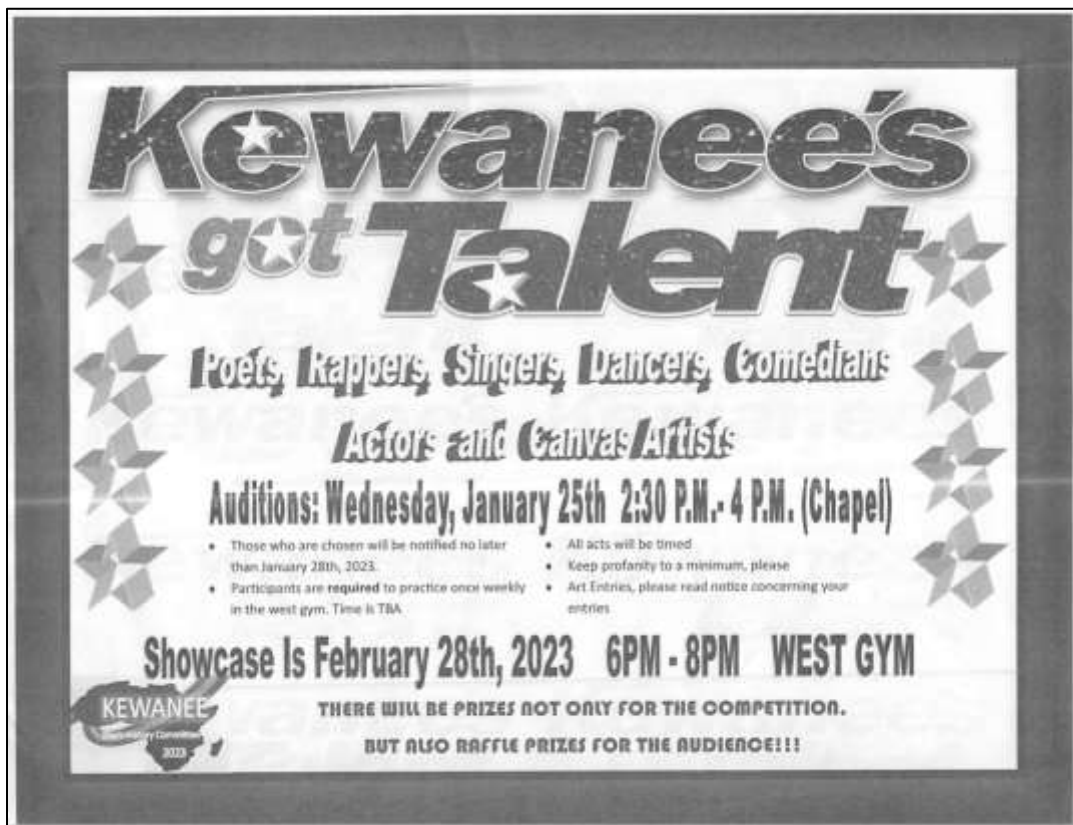


Administrative staff reported that academic opportunities at Kewanee were slim. Someone we spoke to said that the GED program had limited availability, and not everyone was able to take the course before release. During the months of [September-November 2022](#), 95 individuals had participated in the Essential Learning course and three had completed the course.

Administrative staff also stated that there were no opportunities to take post-secondary academic courses at Kewanee, but that they encouraged individuals to take remote classes when feasible. Several people told JHA in-person and via their surveys that they wished college courses were available on-site. In response to the question, “What suggestions do you have for improvement?” one person wrote *“college classes,”* and another wrote *“bring back community colleges!”*

Outside of classes and groups, Kewanee offers other opportunities to productively spend time and socialize while incarcerated. The art studio is reportedly regularly open and widely used. Individuals also have opportunities to express themselves via contributions to the [“Kewanee Horizons” newsletter](#) and [“Two Roads” E-Zine](#). Some individuals in custody also work with the Warden to put together a weekly newscast, called the “Kewanee Address,” which highlights accomplishments of individuals in custody and goes over upcoming activities and events. This newscast is broadcast on prison TVs and is also available on tablets throughout IDOC. About 80% of the Kewanee’s population reportedly had access to watch this newscast. Administrative staff stated that there was a book club, and at the time of JHA’s visit, they were reading *Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace with My Sister’s Killer* by Jeanne Bishop.

Administrative staff said during draft review that the author had since visited Kewanee. Prison-wide events are planned by individuals in custody and include celebrations such as a Cinco de Mayo fiesta, a Fourth of July grill-out, and activities in recognition of Patriot's Day. JHA was able to speak with several individuals who were planning a talent show for Black History Month. They expressed that they enjoyed getting to lead the planning process, as staff typically only altered event details to adjust for scheduling conflicts. As throughout IDOC, celebratory meals are reportedly provided for holidays such as Thanksgiving and Eid al-Fitr.

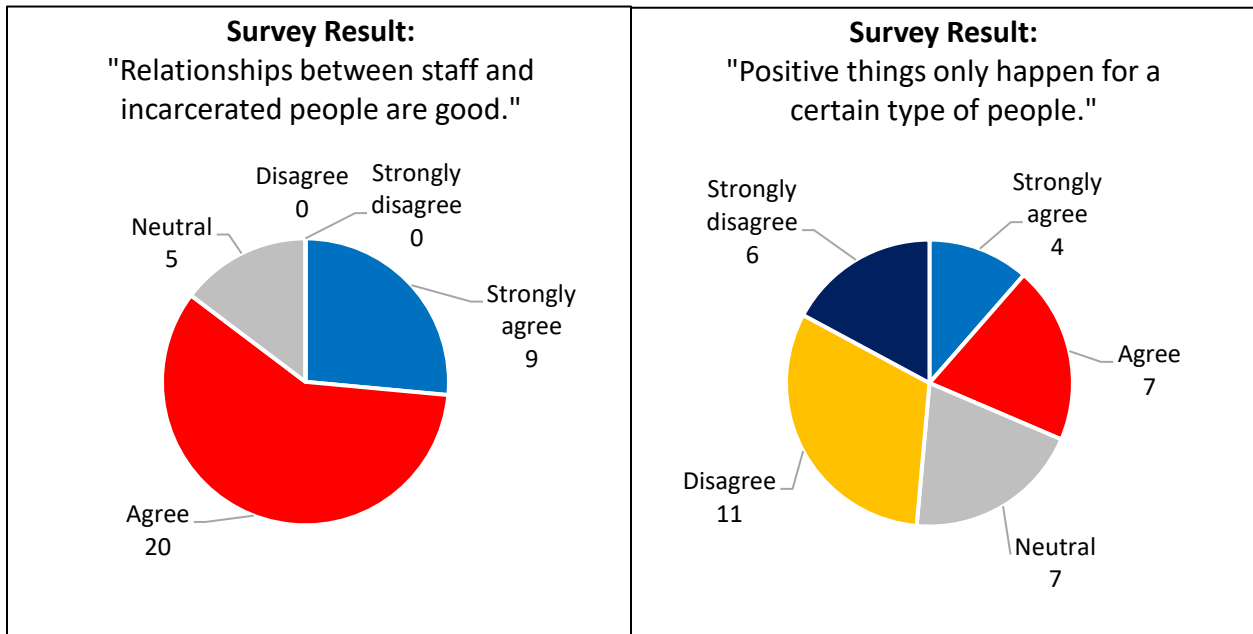


—Flyer for talent show organized by individuals in custody

Kewanee importantly also has services and programming centered on reunification and preserving familial relationships. There are quarterly events that focus on parent-child relationships, such as Day for Dads, Christmas with Dads, and a Father-Daughter Dance. Though these events were halted in 2020 due to COVID, administrative staff stated that the prison's high vaccination rate allowed them to resume these events in spring 2021. One individual JHA spoke with said that he was able to see his daughters for the first time in 25 years at the Father-Daughter Dance. A staff comment also noted Day with Dads as one of the

most positive things at Kewanee. Staff reportedly works with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services when needed to help individuals get custodial rights reinstated. When family members must travel long distances to visit their loved ones in custody, administrators reportedly usually grant extended visit times. Someone wrote in a survey that the most positive thing at Kewanee was *“They care about each person, for real. They care for you and your family, I never thought it was possible but it's real...”* In contrast, in survey comments a few people expressed that COVID visitation restrictions had been a hardship for them and family connection, e.g., *“Let our loved ones come when they can to visit, not dictate—which means we're denied. Take the partitions out so we don't sit like animals in a cage (Behind) plastic like monkeys. NEVER no food in concession machine—who cares about us losing family. Kids don't want to come anymore. And employees ask—whats wrong with visits?,”* and *“As all prisons, our visits are under siege—embargoed! We have not seen our families in years, non-vaccination, some family died I never got to see again. Watch dog that. Statute says 7 visits. They are purposely locking out our visits. Elderly do not know how to check in, the union has tried for the longest to stop physical visits, its finally here. Check the stats when visits were open to now.”* Around the time of the JHA Kewanee visit, in mid-January 2023, IDOC suspended the staff and visitor vaccine mandate. However, other visitation restrictions including requiring scheduling visits, masking, and physical barriers remained. Administrative staff confirmed during May 2023 draft review that these COVID precautions were still in effect. A survey respondent noted a desired improvement was to *“lift COVID restrictions.”*

The individuals JHA spoke with generally had very positive comments on their experiences with staff at Kewanee. Notably, no one disagreed in Kewanee survey responses received through March 2023 with the statement “Relationships between staff and incarcerated people are good,” which is a very unusual result. Several people stated that they found staff to be *“approachable,” “respectful,”* or *“hands-on,”* meaning that they assisted with people’s needs. One person stated that staff was very friendly and would chat with him as he walked around the prison, which he felt helped him develop his social skills. However, one individual in custody said that there would occasionally be a staff member who would treat them disrespectfully. He stated that he would never seek recourse when staff behaved unprofessionally because he was afraid of potentially being transferred. A few individuals also commented on their surveys that they felt that favoritism played a role in who got access to opportunities. For example, one person wrote, *“Don't just help your favorites help all of us. Give us a chance to succeed by allowing all of us to take part in ATC, Day Release, Jobs, etc.”*



Administrative staff stated that they understood the importance of positive relationships between staff and individuals in custody, and encouraged staff to “integrate” into the incarcerated population when appropriate. For example, staff members reportedly use the gym alongside individuals in custody, and they often ate meals together pre-COVID, though this intermingling was reportedly more incidental to food service configuration and timing, and not a purposeful initiative of the prison. JHA noted multiple Kewanee staff survey comments mentioned being supportive of people in custody, trust and collaboration between staff and those in the population, as well as investment in success of individuals as success of the institution.

Like most IDOC prisons, Kewanee has been affected by reported staff shortages. Per administrative staff, IDOC attempts to prioritize staffing Kewanee over other prisons. January 2023 IDOC headcount data indicated that there were 157 correctional officers allocated for Kewanee but only 65 working there. Positions in the upper levels of security were better staffed with 23 out of 25 sergeants, 13 of 13 lieutenants, and six out of seven shift supervisors (majors), for 107 total security staff, or an overall vacancy rate of 47% for security. There were 58 of 73 non-security state staff positions reportedly filled at Kewanee. However, it seems the Kewanee staff allocation may be based on a presumption of a higher population, or even operational capacity (682). As noted above, there were only two housing units open and 193 individuals in custody. While this is a multi-level security facility, it is similar to lower security prison, which

typically have lower staffing ratios, and where people are likely to want to behave well to avoid transfer. **Again, JHA recommends independent staffing analysis to determine actual and projected staffing needs based on current and projected population needs and programming.**

In survey comments a staff member gave a similar recommendations to JHA's, writing that *“My primary concern is getting more staff and individuals to fill the entire facility. This place helps staff and individuals in many ways; being able to help more people all around and have great impact,”* writing that their suggestion for improvement is to *“Create a serious timeline of opening the entire facility to include programming and the best number of staff to do so.”* Another Kewanee staff survey comment noted that the most stressful part of their work is *“Trying to get job done with no money for the proper supplies, buying equipment, proper maintenance of property/equipment(no money), and poor hiring/staffing process.”* Other staff also mentioned hardships relating to not being properly resourced both with staff and in other areas, like with technology and physical plant issues, at times noting feeling they lack adequate guidance, consistency, or support from state-level leadership.

Kewanee has nurses onsite to assist with medical needs, and a doctor does telehealth appointments and conducts visits in-person when needed. There is also an onsite dental hygienist, and a dentist comes to the prison once or twice a week. Kewanee reportedly had a 95% staff COVID-19 vaccination rate at the time of JHA's visit. 60 individuals in custody at Kewanee had reportedly contracted COVID-19 at some point in the pandemic as of January 18, 2023, but none had tested positive since September 2022 at the time of the visit. As of mid-April 2023, the number of positive cases in the population at Kewanee recorded during the pandemic had risen to 67. Administrative staff stated that they were one of the first IDOC prisons to safely reinstate communal activities such as yard and gym in spring 2021, with precautions such as wiping down equipment between uses and frequent hand sanitizer use. Administrative staff also noted during draft review that individuals in custody had outdoor access throughout the COVID pandemic due to the patios attached to each housing unit. JHA did note that few people wore masks during our visit, despite IDOC mask requirements still being in effect.

People incarcerated at Kewanee LSRC continue to report better relationships with staff and increased productive activity and independence as compared to the rest of the IDOC population, which they value greatly. More programming, less isolation, increased movement,

better interactions with corrections staff are generally noted and valued by the people who are at Kewanee and JHA has heard from some people who spent time there prior to their release that they believe these factors were of benefit to them. Staff seemed to agree regarding the benefits of the unique prison environment at Kewanee; staff commented in a survey: *"KLSRC is by far the best facility in the state for both employees and incarcerated individuals."*



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9183 or jvollen@thejha.org

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report concerns and 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 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.

