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**Special Report**



# **Communication Impacts People in IDOC and Their Support Systems: Changes are needed to improve outcomes and daily living**

February 2024

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# Introduction

WE ARE CONSTANTLY ON LEVEL-1 AND LEVEL-2 LOCKDOWNS, WHICH IS TAKING AWAY ACCESS TO OUR OUT OF CELL TIME. MEANING WE CAN NOT CALL OUR FAMILY AND SUPPORTIVE FRIENDS, LOVED ONES. WE CANNOT GO ON VISITS.

—Individual in Custody at Dixon, February 2023

Regular communication with the outside world is vital to people in custody. Methods of communication such as phones, mail, video visits, and email via tablets allow incarcerated people to stay in touch with loved ones, access information related to their legal rights, and prepare for their lives after prison. Therefore, it is crucial that prisons provide reliable methods of communication to those in custody. This report documents issues related to the primary means of communication and access to information available in prisons, including phones, tablets, mail, and law library resources. This report will also suggest potential pilot programs for bolstering communication and access to information in IDOC.

JHA last published a [special report](#) on communication issues in June 2019. Since the publication of that report, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the necessity of reliable access to the outside world.<sup>1</sup> In-person visitation has always been difficult for people in prisons due to factors such as long travel times, costs associated with travel, and visitor restrictions on people with criminal histories. COVID-19 created extreme and unforeseen barriers to in-person visits. The suspension of visits prior to vaccine availability, COVID-related requirements to visit in-person, and ongoing facility-wide quarantines all affected visitation. In addition to pandemic related shutdowns and suspended visitation, staff shortages have also led to facility lockdowns. Restricted visitation means that access to phones, tablets, mail services, and video visits is of even greater importance to people in prison.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the impact of COVID-19 on communications, see JHA's 2020 [COVID-19 Survey Report on communications](#).

Accessing information from outside the prison is also an issue, particularly as it relates to legal challenges and law suits. Incarcerated people may rely on legal visits or calls (and other phone and mail access) as well as law libraries to access information and advocate for themselves in court. Law libraries continue to have issues with limited access and providing adequate resources to people in custody, and their services have also been impacted by COVID-19 and reported staff shortages.

JHA continues to receive reports from people in custody about the obstacles they face while attempting to communicate with the outside world and access information. This report is intended to provide an updated overview of ongoing challenges incarcerated people experience, note changes that have been made in recent years, and recommend improvements that are still needed.

The ability to communicate with the outside world and access information is critical for people in custody. In the process of writing this report, staff from JHA and the [Women's Justice Institute](#) (WJI) met with a focus group of nine women who were previously incarcerated in IDOC's women's prisons. The women answered discussion questions about their experiences communicating and accessing information while incarcerated. They provided valuable insight on the challenges they experienced and offered suggestions for change. Their comments have been incorporated into this report. Women may be disproportionately impacted by barriers to communication, as women are more often the [primary caregivers](#) to their children. JHA notes that men who are incarcerated experience the same struggles and are also impacted by barriers to communication and access to information, and the use of a women's focus group is not intended to diminish the difficulties they experience in this regard.

When asked "What did communication while incarcerated mean to you?," women in the focus group said *"patience," "strength," "precious," "livelihood," "routine," "connection,"* and *"everything."* A theme stressed by many of the women was the importance of communication to maintaining bonds with their families. As put by one woman, *"communication is precious because you never know...could be last time you talk to someone."* One woman in the group was born into the prison system, as her mother was pregnant with her while she was incarcerated. She stated that as she grew up, *"the phone has been the only consistency in the mother-daughter relationship,"* because she was only able to visit her mother twice a month. Letters were also an important means of maintaining the mother-daughter relationship

throughout the years, and she still had some of letters that her mother sent her while incarcerated. Other women voiced that communication was especially important when they were forced to leave their children in households that became unstable or abusive. One woman stated that after she spoke to her daughter on the phone about her daughter's upset mood, her daughter became motivated to speak out to a relative about an abusive situation she was experiencing. Many women stressed that they felt a lack of parental control while incarcerated. Speaking with their children over the phone or seeing them during visits allowed them to feel like they were still able to protect and comfort them. Obstacles to communication that dictated if, when, and how they could communicate with their children were therefore very stressful. The women articulated the need to be available to their children regularly, at specific and reliable times, in order to continue dialogues and connections and provide support to them and those who cared for them.

Confusion over prison communication systems was also highlighted as a barrier to maintaining familial bonds. One woman noted that cultural differences made it difficult to stay in contact with her parents while incarcerated, because they did not understand how to do things like set up an account to receive phone calls and were used to paying for things in cash only. She said that attempting to navigate these cultural differences was frustrating, and the lack of communication that resulted weighed on her throughout her incarceration.

Women in the focus group also voiced that communication and access to information were vital to reentry and reunification efforts. One woman stated that better communication was needed within prisons about what incarcerated people need to do to prepare for release, such as filling out paperwork related to custodial rights and dealing with outstanding warrants. Other information, such as information related to obtaining employment, was not made easily accessible to people in custody. Another woman stated that barriers to communication made reentry preparation like finding a host site difficult. Reunification efforts are also impeded when it is difficult to communicate with outside supports. One woman said that it was challenging to show their efforts at rehabilitation to others when they were seldom able to communicate, asking, *"How is your family supposed to know if you're improving?"* Many people rely on family and friends for housing and other supports upon release, and maintaining contact

**"You cannot have  
reunification  
without  
communication."**

—Focus group participant

is therefore important to ensuring that the transition to life outside goes smoothly. A woman asked, *“How are we supposed to rebuild our lives, build our futures if we cannot even talk to our support systems?”*

For so many people in IDOC, including the women who were generous enough to share their time, insight, and experiences with us, communication is their lifeline for reasons both practical and emotional. Frustration and pain permeate all aspects of communication for people in prison, and limitations in accessing information and maintaining supportive relationships cause people who are incarcerated significant stress and negatively impact their well-being and ability to plan for the future.

# Summary of Findings and Recommendations

1. JHA believes that restricting communications as a punishment should be discontinued as a practice permanently. Maintaining connections with loved ones and accessing information should not be treated as “privileges” that can be taken away. This form of punishment is not only unnecessary; it is likely counterproductive to the goal of rehabilitation.
2. Communications are critically important to people in IDOC and their loved ones and support systems. Having opportunities to be in touch with people outside of prison due to staff capacity to monitor calls or screen mail must be addressed either through staffing changes or use of automated screening tools. JHA recommends that prisons prioritize communications access by devoting staff to approving phone and visitor lists, as well as staff for screening mail and e-messages, or identify and utilize software that can more quickly scan e-messages and reduce reliance on staff to do this.
3. Limited access to areas with phones outside of cells and sleeping areas, as well as inadequate numbers of telephones, continues to be a stressor for people in custody and a major obstacle to maintaining connections with loved ones. JHA continues to receive reports that the lack of phone availability causes issues among people in custody, including individuals only passing the phone to their friends, requiring payment from other incarcerated individuals for phone access, “gang control” of phones, and physical altercations. JHA recommends installing more phones or preferably, providing tablets to everyone in IDOC that have phone call capabilities and are functional in living units so that this is no longer an issue and people have greater opportunity and flexibility to stay in touch with loved ones on the outside.
4. JHA discourages prison mail scanning as it strips much of the human element and sentimentality of receiving mail. Scanning mail also may have a chilling effect on communication, as some people may be uncomfortable with their letters being scanned and uploaded to a digital database. Further, there is little evidence that mail scanning reduces access or use of drugs in prisons.

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations, continued

5. Communicating information about matters important to people in custody is a way that IDOC can better help people understand issues, avoid miscommunications, and inform people of any steps taken to address the identified problem or situation. JHA recommends that memos about issues affecting the entire IDOC population as well as those specific to certain facilities be made available to everyone in IDOC through postings throughout the prison in common areas and via facility cable channels. Memos and information bulletins should also be made publicly available on the IDOC website so that outside stakeholders are also able to access this information.
6. Tablets should be provided to everyone in IDOC custody without charge. JHA continues to urge IDOC to put in place a contract that provides universal tablets with improved and increased functionality. Capacities should be added to the tablets, including ability to make phone calls, do legal research, and undertake programming opportunities. Efforts to make technology more accessible and reliable should be pursued in order to help individuals stay in contact with the outside world and best prepare for life after prison.
7. In order for tablets to be functional in IDOC, investment is needed. Prior to investing in technological infrastructure, however, Illinois should consider the age and costs of deferred maintenance for many of the prisons as articulated in the CGL Facility Master Plan Report, and close those prisons that are most in need of costly repairs and unfit for human habitation in order to best direct the limited resources to those that remain in use.
8. People routinely shared with JHA their frustration with video visitation issues and rules. JHA recommends that when enforcing the rules for video visits, staff should ensure that they are doing so fairly and professionally. Additionally, warnings should generally be given before cutting off a visit early due to rule violations. Because of distance, expense, and opportunity, video visits are the only way that some people in custody can see the faces of their loved ones. Managing them as smoothly as possible should be prioritized.

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations, continued

9. Law libraries are critical to people's legal rights to access the court system and self-advocate. They must be accessible to everyone; copies of documents should be permitted and made affordable; and enough time in law libraries must be provided to ensure that people are not denied the opportunity to conduct their research. In addition, prisons should train more individuals in custody to be law clerks: their assistance is helpful to the people in custody, the role assists with time needed in law libraries, and it is a useful, employable skillset to have for post release job acquisition. JHA also recommends providing everyone with tablets with legal research capabilities, which would allow people in custody to conduct their research from dayrooms or even their cells if Wi-Fi signals allow. Regular audits of law libraries should be conducted to verify that frequently requested materials are available and up-to-date. Regular maintenance of equipment should also be conducted, and issues with library technology should be addressed promptly.
10. JHA proposes IDOC pilot two initiatives to improve communications: (1) Adding phone access and legal research capabilities to tablets and (2) Making all phone calls free. Further discussion of these initiatives can be found below.

# Phones

## Access to Phones

Limited access to areas with phones outside of cells and sleeping areas, as well as inadequate numbers of telephones, continues to be a stressor for people in custody and a major obstacle to maintaining connections with loved ones. JHA continues to receive reports that the lack of phone availability causes issues among people in custody, including individuals only passing the phone to their friends, requiring payment from other incarcerated individuals for phone access, “*gang control*” of phones, and physical altercations. For example, someone from [Dixon](#) wrote on their 2022 MQPL survey,<sup>2</sup> “*The gangs dominate the phones and don’t let non gang members use the phone. . . Gang members also take people’s PIN numbers + have them put numbers on their phones lists so they can use the phone back to back.*” **Situations like this underscore the importance of ensuring that everyone has adequate access to phones, as people can become desperate to speak with loved ones and may resort to violence and coercion to control phone usage.**

Limited phone access can often be attributed to a lack of out-of-cell or recreation time. Someone from [Pinckneyville](#) wrote on their 2023 JHA MQPL survey, “*Only 1 hour out of the cell time each day to attempt to use the phone and shower. With so many people Being let out at once (32-50 people) for 8 phones and 2 showers it leads to chaos.*” Phone access becomes even more restricted during facility-wide quarantines and lockdowns. For example, one individual at the [Stateville Minimum Security Unit \(MSU\)](#) wrote on their 2022 JHA MQPL survey, “*Locked down 23 hours a day. . . Have around 30 people who come out for day room at once who all got to try to get a phone call and a shower within an hour.*” Others commonly continued to report getting as little as 20 minutes a day to both shower and use the phone during facility-wide quarantines, forcing them to choose between the two. Individuals in custody have

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<sup>2</sup> In 2022, JHA began conducting an adapted “[Measuring the Quality of Prison Life](#)” (MQPL) survey at IDOC prisons. This survey was created by the [Prison Research Centre](#) at the University of Cambridge (PRC) in order to evaluate the culture inside prisons, and it was adapted for use in Illinois in collaboration with the PRC. It is an evidence-based instrument designed to collect and assess the perceptions and experiences shared by people who are incarcerated; JHA is piloting this survey in the United States along with our partners in New York and Pennsylvania in order to better identify, understand, and address issues inside prisons.

continually noted that the harsh time limits on phone calls impede their ability to maintain meaningful connections with loved ones. Some may miss opportunities to use the phone due to their school or work schedules, and others find that their loved ones are not available during the brief time they are allowed phone access. 20 minutes is generally not enough time to call multiple numbers, and many people in custody have family members who live in different households.

In our 2019 communications [report](#), JHA noted that IDOC had implemented various changes in attempts to reduce competition over phones. For example, IDOC instated a policy that places a block on Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) so that after one person uses their PIN to make a call, they may not use the phone again for at least 30 minutes. This restriction further complicates the ability to make multiple phone calls within a short time period. Another measure that had been implemented at the time of our last report was that some prisons were staggering out-of-cell time to allow more opportunities to access the phone, e.g., letting individuals into the dayroom five people at a time instead of all people on a housing unit simultaneously. This practice appeared to have some positive effects on phone access. At the height of the pandemic, some prisons tried having individuals sign up to use the phone to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 by allowing time to sanitize phones between calls. This practice was not received well by some because sign up times were at times incompatible with work and school schedules or their family's availability.

**“The administration here at Sheridan CC intentionally and knowingly creates a hostile environment while also creating a ‘Hunger Games’ type of atmosphere amongst the inmates forcing us to compete against one another to use the telephone. There isn’t enough time for everyone to use the phone.”**

—Individual in Custody at Sheridan,  
September 2022

## Call Lists and Paying for Calls

Individuals in custody are [required](#) upon intake to submit a list of up to 30 names and phone numbers to be added to their phone list. Thereafter, they may only submit changes to their phone list once per month. Each number on the phone list must be approved by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), or Warden. This process is a change from previous years, during which individuals in custody could independently add up to 20 numbers to their phone list as

they called them, without prior approval. This prior practice was noticeably more efficient, though it led to issues with people using others' PINs, since calls out were not limited by phone lists. In response to review of JHA's draft of this report, IDOC confirmed that the Agency had piloted an automated Personally Allowed Numbers (PAN) system in 2019, but stated that it *"did not work."*

People report delays in phone list approvals under the current IDOC policy, which can understandably be frustrating. Similarly, people report phone lists had not been updated in several months despite their having submitted the requisite information, which can prevent contact with outside supports. A lack of counselor access is often reported as a barrier to updating phone lists. In responding to a draft of this report, IDOC stated that the agency's telecom department has discussed alternatives to the current system with Securus, but *"the alternatives would cause more delays than currently experienced."* Further, they noted that the contract between Securus and IDOC stipulates that *"lists are to be submitted once every 30 days per individual and Securus is to have sufficient staffing to process the lists within 7 days."*

During the JHA/WJI focus group, women highlighted the stress caused by long waits to update phone lists. One woman stated that she was unable to make calls for the first two months she was incarcerated in IDOC while she waited for her phone list to be approved. Being newly incarcerated can be particularly stressful, and she wished she were able to get support from loved ones during that time. Other women stated that though they were told by IDOC staff that phone lists were updated twice a month, in reality they were usually only updated once a month. **JHA [continues to recommend](#) that prisons prioritize communications access by devoting staff to approving phone and visitor lists, as well as staff for screening mail and e-messages.**

The cost of a phone call from prison was dramatically reduced in 2016, and phone calls from an IDOC prison now cost less than a penny a minute. During the JHA/WJI focus group, one woman who was first incarcerated in the 80s stated that *"one thing my family still talks about is cost of phone calls, it was hundreds of dollars a month."* Today, a 20-minute phone call costs approximately 19 cents. Though this is a huge improvement from prior years, it should be noted that for people in custody without funds, even this nominal amount can be impactful. To illustrate this point, JHA has received several letters from individuals in custody enclosed inside survey responses, for which JHA pays the postage. One individual from Sheridan enclosed a

letter with his survey and wrote that he had been *“awaiting a opportunity to send out this letter”* because he had not *“yet been able to make a phone call due to funds or get envelopes to mail.”* The cost of communication is especially problematic for people who are indigent when one considers the scarcity of work assignments at many IDOC prisons, though work assignments often do not pay much more than state pay, which is \$13/month as of September 2023. During the JHA/WJI focus group discussion, a woman who relied solely on state pay while incarcerated voiced that paying for phone calls was a stressor when she also had to pay for things like personal hygiene items. Though many of these items are supposed to be provided to indigent people, she stated that these items were not always issued. **A proposal to make phone calls from prisons free is discussed in this report’s section on [proposed pilots](#).**

## Technology

Newer technologies are becoming increasingly important to people in custody for both communicating with loved ones and accessing information. Video visits allow individuals in custody to see their loved ones’ faces when in-person visits are not feasible, and tablets allow people in prison to send and receive e-messages and access select media. Kiosks in law libraries are intended to allow people in custody to research issues related to their legal rights. Access to technology such as computers in re-entry rooms is also important as people in custody look for employment and housing opportunities. For all these reasons, it is important for people in custody to have opportunities to use technology to communicate with the outside world. Further, incarcerated people should be given the tools necessary to properly use technology. Classes that instruct those in custody on how to use computers, tablets, and smart phones are highly sought-after by people who are preparing to leave prison. Kewanee Life Skills Reentry Center had recently implemented such a class as of JHA’s 2023 visit to Kewanee, and people in custody there gave the class high praise. **Efforts to make technology more accessible and reliable should be pursued in order to help individuals stay in contact with the outside world and best prepare for life after prison.**

One major obstacle to using technology in prison relates to longstanding infrastructure issues. Many prisons have only partial Wi-Fi coverage, which often limits connectivity to dayrooms or other communal areas. IDOC has attributed this issue to old wiring throughout prisons. Outdated infrastructure has also led to functionality issues, and JHA receives reports of long

waits to get GTL representatives onsite for repairs. One person in custody at Menard wrote to JHA in 2021 that *“sometimes there are instances where we have to wait 30 minutes sometimes more to connect to the server.”* Another person wrote from East Moline in 2021 that the internet was very slow, *“especially sending mail. We send it and it doesn’t go through, we lose it. No save to draft.”* During JHA’s March 2023 visit to Southwestern Illinois, individuals in custody reported that the Wi-Fi was frequently down, sometimes for as long as a week. Wi-Fi signals in prisons also frequently do not extend into the cells or healthcare units, meaning that most tablet services are only usable in certain communal areas such as the dayroom. This is especially problematic considering that there have been ongoing lockdowns due to COVID-19 outbreaks or reported staff shortages.

In a response to our 2019 report, IDOC administrative staff stated that *“IDOC’s telecommunications team is working with GTL to evaluate the wireless networks,”* and that there *“is currently a plan to enhance the networks in the day rooms.”* There was an appropriation in IDOC’s FY24 budget for technological infrastructure improvements, but exactly when and where these will be made is not yet clear. In response to draft review of this report, IDOC stated, *“The agency is currently in the process of selecting a vendor to expand all communication platforms within IDOC.”* **While investment is needed, before investing in technological infrastructure, Illinois should consider the age and costs of deferred maintenance for many of the prisons as articulated in [the CGL Facility Master Plan Report](#), and close those prisons that are most in need of costly repairs and unfit for human habitation in order to best direct the limited resources to those that remain in use.**

## Tablets and E-Messaging

Tablets have become increasingly popular in IDOC prisons, allowing another means for people in custody to communicate with loved ones via e-message and providing opportunities for stress relief via music, movies, gaming, and podcast subscriptions. Memos and other information relevant to people in custody can also be shared through tablets. In response to draft review of this report, in December 2023, IDOC stated that approximately 20,000 individuals in custody have tablets; this would be about two out of three people of the static incarcerated population. The cost of tablets, however, is a barrier to access for many. Per information provided by IDOC in June 2023, tablets cost \$124.99 each. Replacement chargers cost \$9.99, and JHA has heard many reports of chargers breaking frequently as well as chargers being unavailable for

purchase through commissary (for more information on item unavailability at commissary, see our [2022 Commissary Survey](#)). IDOC reported in response to draft review of this report that, *“New tablets are being phased out because the model is older and no longer available from the manufacturer. Refurbished tablets can be purchased for \$87.49 and have a 270-day warranty.”*

A GTL e-message costs 15 cents, which is significantly more affordable than the cost of a write-out, which is 70 cents as of June 2023. Music, podcast, gaming, and newsfeed subscriptions are available on tablets for additional fees, though some people who pay for these services have expressed frustration that they cannot be accessed from cells due to lack of connectivity. In response to draft review of this report, IDOC in December 2023 provided updated pricing information for subscription services; for example, a single MP3 download can be purchased for \$1.60, or 20 downloads for \$28.00, while a month subscription for music costs \$19.99, or a year costs \$159.99.

People in custody can send e-messages via their tablets or via kiosks that are usually available in dayrooms or other communal areas. In facilities that do not have dayrooms, such as maximum-security prisons, kiosks may be available in galleries. In response to draft review of this report, IDOC reported that most prisons have two kiosks per subunit or wing of a housing unit that are available during dayroom hours and as determined by the policy of each facility. However, IDOC noted that there are significant differences in design and physical plant of each facility which may affect individuals' access.

IDOC is one of the few state prison systems that does not take site-commission revenue from e-messages sent from prison, which keeps the price of e-messages relatively low. However, [Connecticut](#) as of June 2021 provided free e-messages to incarcerated people, and [California](#) as of 2023 allowed individuals in custody to send up to 20 free e-messages per week. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, IDOC provided two free e-messages per week to individuals in custody; this practice appears to be discontinued.

A common issue people in IDOC report is that e-messaging services are very slow. Many people have reported that e-messages take at least a week, often several weeks, to be sent or received. One person at [Sheridan wrote on their 2022 MQPL survey](#), *“it takes 30-45 days for them to process our e-messages. They have security measures built into our tablets, so it shouldn't take any longer than 24 hours to send or receive a message which is supposed to be*

*faster than regular mail. Here it's not, it takes longer.*” Given that an e-message does not have to be searched for contraband, and it should be easier to identify prohibited content due to easier-to-read text and perhaps the use of machine learning/AI software, it is strange that they would take longer to send and receive than physical letters. **JHA continues to recommend that IDOC prioritize hiring staff dedicated to work mailrooms and monitor communications to ensure that people are receiving them in a timely manner. However, given staffing shortages throughout IDOC, a more productive approach might be to identify and activate software that can more quickly scan e-messages and reduce reliance on staff to do this.**

The tablets available in IDOC do not include some sought-after features such as the ability to make phone calls, conduct legal research, or have video visits. Individuals in custody with tablets can only pay to do things like send e-messages or purchase a limited selection of music, games, podcasts, movies, and newsfeeds. Because access to law libraries is often restricted due to a lack of out-of-cell time or a lack of library staff—and because law libraries frequently do not have adequate legal materials—adding legal research capabilities to tablets would be highly beneficial to people in custody. Some individuals in custody have asked if submitting grievances via tablets could be possible, as this may help assure people that their grievances are not being misplaced or tampered with. GTL tablets do have the capacity for legal research, phone calls, video visits, and grievance submissions (among other features) per the [GTL website](#). In June 2021, IDOC issued a memo stating that individuals in custody were to receive JPay tablets with phone capabilities but then individuals in custody *“received a vague message that this ‘contract’ was either terminated or on hold.”* JHA is disappointed that this initiative fell through, and we continue to hear that such a contract is being sought, but thus far nothing has come to fruition. **JHA continues to urge IDOC to put in place a contract that provides universal tablets with improved and increased functionality.** For more on adding phone capabilities to tablets, see this report’s section on [proposed pilots](#).

During the JHA/WJI focus group conversation, one woman stated that she considered buying a tablet while she was incarcerated, but decided against it because she had a state-loaned TV. She was told that if she bought a tablet, that TV would be taken away. Because TVs from commissary are quite expensive (\$243.75 as of June 2023), she decided against purchasing a tablet. **JHA discourages this practice, as it clearly impedes access to tablets.** Another issue brought up during the focus group discussion was the system for sending e-messages to

someone for the first time. One woman noted that individuals in custody cannot send e-messages to anyone new unless that person puts money on a GTL account and e-messages them first. This extra step impedes communication by forcing people in custody to rely on outside contacts to initiate e-messaging. **Alternative methods of initiating e-messaging should be explored if possible.**

## Video Visits

While video visits cannot substitute for in-person visits, the ability to see the face of a friend or family member is invaluable to those in prison. They are especially important when in-person visits are impossible because of COVID outbreaks, or due to the time and expense for loved ones to travel to the prison. In a [study](#) by the Prison Policy Initiative, distance from home is a strong predictor for whether a person in prison will receive visits from family. Since the pandemic, other barriers to in-person visitation have developed, such as the [requirement](#) that all visitors sign up for a visit time at least seven days in advance. For all these reasons, video visits are an important part of keeping in contact with the outside world.

As individuals in custody grew increasingly dependent on video visits during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, JHA received many reports of video visit technology being unreliable. We heard from individuals in custody that video would frequently glitch, audio was poor, or visits would end prematurely. IDOC has since taken steps to improve the quality of video visits, such as having GTL [upgrade](#) the WebRTC system in early 2022 so that video visits would be compatible with iPhones. Video visits nevertheless continue to have some issues with functionality. For example, during JHA's March 2023 visit to Jacksonville, staff reported that video visits malfunctioned on a daily basis. An individual in custody stated that they had scheduled six video visits while at Jacksonville, and all but one failed due to technology malfunctions.

Video visit cancelations are often attributed to a lack of staff to monitor video visits or lockdowns/quarantines. We also hear that video visits are cancelled after they have started due to people in custody—or their visitors—violating video visit rules. Some of the stated reasons for cancelling a visit, however, seem arbitrary and unjustified. A letter in August 2022 from someone at Hill said that someone had a visit cancelled after two minutes without warning because his *“visitor seem to be distracted with her eyes.”* This writer further asserts that staff

members are *“waiting to cancel the visit for any made up petty reason. They can hear a kid crying in the background & cancel it.”* The IDOC visitation [dress code](#) also applies to video visits, and some staff members have made visitors feel uncomfortable in their enforcement of the dress code. For example, someone wrote that staff monitoring video visits *“are degrading our family’s clothing wear,”* and that staff will reportedly make comments like *“your showing your shoulders, it’s too much neckline, it has straps, you look like you don’t have a bra, you look like you got a dress too short.”* We have also heard a report of women being asked to stand up multiple times so that staff can confirm that they have met the dress code. **When enforcing the rules for video visits, staff should ensure that they are doing so fairly and professionally. Additionally, warnings should generally be given before cutting off a visit early due to rule violations.** Because of distance, expense, and opportunity, video visits are the only way that some people in custody can see the faces of their loved ones. Managing them as smoothly as possible should be prioritized.

Video visits cost \$3.25 per 20-minute visit as of February 2023, according to the [IDOC website](#). IDOC began forgoing commissions for GTL services in November 2021, which resulted in this significantly improved price (a 25-minute visit had previously cost \$6.25). The IDOC website as of July 2023 also states that GTL is providing one free video visit per week, though people reported mixed experiences with obtaining a free video visit in JHA’s [2020 COVID-19 survey](#), with 57.5% of respondents reporting that they did not get a free video visit in the prior week. IDOC reported in response to draft review of this report that individuals in custody continue to receive one video visit per week at no cost. IDOC further shared that between January 1, 2020 and November 28, 2023, more than three quarters of the video visits in IDOC, 985,900 of 1,268,076 (77.75%) total video visit, were provided at no cost to individuals in custody or their families.

The [Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act](#), federal legislation which was signed into law January 2023, requires the FCC to ensure “just and reasonable charges” for “any audio or video communications service used by inmates for the purpose of communicating with individuals outside the correctional institution where the inmate is held, regardless of technology used.” This act expands the FCC’s jurisdiction and permits it to regulate the cost of video visits from state prisons. Depending on what the FCC determines is a “just and reasonable” rate, this act may impact the cost of video visits. Rate caps are expected

to be set sometime toward the end of 2024. However, for people in prison who are indigent and rely on state pay to meet their needs, even reduced costs for video visits may still be a barrier.

## Mail

The mail room... let's just say, we all just got our first batch of incoming X-mas cards last monday, January 30th! Most here are scared to say anything about this because the administration defends the mailroom. They'll start throwing your mail away! I get LEGAL MAIL a month late! Legal mail is not a priority here.

—Individual in Custody at Illinois River, February 2023

Several people wrote on their MQPL surveys that they have been told by staff that “*mail is a privilege,*” implying that they do not have a right to receive mail. **JHA strongly believes that mail is not a privilege, but rather an essential link to information, loved ones, and the outside world for people in custody.** Mail is a means of communication guaranteed to people in custody regardless of [disciplinary privilege restrictions](#), such as demoted grade status. Phone calls and video visits may be limited based on grade (though legal calls and visits may not). Mail is also a critical option for communicating with the outside world when movement is restricted and phone use and video visits are limited, or where e-messages are unavailable or problematic. It is therefore concerning that JHA continues to hear from people in custody that mail services are slow and unreliable.

JHA often hears that people in custody are receiving mail that is postmarked several weeks, or even months, prior to receipt. We receive reports of legal mail being subject to these delays, which is troubling since it may be subject to time constraints. Individuals in custody also indicate that mail is not being delivered on a consistent schedule; for example, several people from Sheridan indicated on their 2022 MQPL surveys that they were only receiving mail once a week. Likewise, many people at Decatur reported that mail was delivered just once a week during our [2022 visit](#). Some have reported that incarcerated people will go weeks at a time without mail delivery. IDOC administrators have previously attributed irregular mail services to a lack of staff in prison mailrooms. When mailrooms are staffed, they are sometimes staffed by temporary officers with minimal experience, which may contribute to delays. Though addressing staff

shortages has been a challenge at IDOC facilities, the lack of permanent staff in mailrooms must be addressed promptly.

Some individuals in custody also report that their mail often goes missing. One person from Danville wrote on their 2022 MQPL survey, *“you may not get this survey either—sometimes the mail ‘goes missing’ is what they say—but it’s worth a try.”* JHA occasionally hears from individuals in custody that we have not replied to their letters, only to reference our communication records and discover that we did not receive a letter from that individual. Further, the security of privileged mail is a concern for incarcerated people, who sometimes report that their legal mail has been opened.

Incoming mail is subject to a number of restrictions, which can be found on the [IDOC website](#), such as prohibitions against stickers, stains, and the use of crayons and markers. JHA has received reports that these rules are not accessible to people in custody, which results in stress and confusion when letters from their loved ones are rejected by IDOC. This is especially stressful when individuals do not receive the required [written notice](#) of their mail rejection. Unclear prohibitions against contraband and inconsistent enforcement are also a source of stress. For example, an individual from Decatur reported during [JHA’s 2021 visit](#) that a package had been sent to her from Amazon three times; it was sent back the first two times, but accepted the third time. Some people say that their loved ones are confused about what qualifies as contraband and are thus deterred from sending items at all. **JHA recommends that all regulations on what incarcerated people may receive in the mail be clearly stated and readily accessible to ensure that communications are not impeded by misunderstandings.**

The cost of write-outs can be an obstacle for some individuals in custody; a write-out costs 70 cents as of June 2023, about four times the cost of a 15-minute phone call. JHA was encouraged to see that, per an IDOC memo from December 2021, individuals in custody are now to receive three free write-outs per month. JHA was pleased to receive some letters from individuals sent via these free write-outs in yellow envelopes, which we had been shown inside of facilities, indicating that at least some people in custody have received them. However, many still report not receiving free write-outs.

In recent years, some state prison systems have begun scanning and making copies of incoming mail. Copies are then distributed to people in custody, or they are digitally uploaded and made available to view via kiosks or tablets. The intent is to reduce the introduction of contraband, primarily drugs, into prisons. As of 2023, IDOC has not implemented this practice. **JHA discourages prison mail scanning, as it strips much of the sentimentality of receiving mail.** Scanning mail also may have a chilling effect on communication, as some people may be uncomfortable with their letters being scanned and uploaded to a digital database. Further, there is little evidence that mail scanning reduces instances of drug use inside prisons; [early data](#) in some states that have begun scanning prison mail shows that drug use and overdoses in prison have remained the same or risen since implementing the practice.

## Disciplinary Use of Communication Restrictions

As emphasized in JHA's [2019 report](#) on communication issues, JHA strongly opposes restricting communications as a form of punishment. Under the [Administrative Code](#), individuals in custody designated as "B" grade may have video visits eliminated and may be limited to two telephone calls per 30-day period. Those on "C" grade may be barred from all phone use and other forms of communication with the outside world, with the exception of in-person visits and mail. However, some prisons will permit more communication, such as allowing limited phone calls, e-messages, or video visits, though this is not required. This punishment is highly stressful to incarcerated people. Some individuals may resort to trading or paying for things like phone access, which is prohibited in IDOC, in order to maintain contact with outside

**“It’s called the ‘C-grade house.’ In this housing unit they turned off the cable, wifi internet, and also the kiosk machine. The kiosk was for the individuals in custody to receive and send emails because our tablets and TV’s are taken...Recently they just cut off the phones on the yard so the C-grade house can’t get on the phone at all. C/O [redacted] told us “you don’t get phone calls until you get off C-grade.”**

*—Individual in Custody at Pinckneyville,  
August 2022*

supports. This has led some prisons to establish C-grade units to make it more difficult for these trades to occur.

One individual in custody at [Sheridan wrote on their 2022 MQPL survey](#), *“I was told that I can’t use the phone or send messages/emails to keep in contact with family and figure out my parole plan and find placement, because of my grade level.”* These restrictions on communications are particularly concerning considering that JHA often hears about people being on B and C grades for long periods of time; for example, as noted in our [2020 monitoring report on Pontiac](#), 108 people at Pontiac at the time of JHA’s visit had C-grade terms of more than a year. In-person visits are difficult for many people in custody, as most people in IDOC prisons are from Cook County and are housed in prisons that are hours away from family and friends. Mail, on its own, is also an insufficient means of staying in contact since we frequently hear reports of mail services being slow and unreliable and people may have literacy and other access issues. Further, hearing the voice of a loved one can be invaluable to the mental health of people in prison. Prohibiting people from using the phone occasionally leads people to use someone else’s PIN to contact loved ones, and if caught doing so, they will find themselves in a vicious cycle of further sanctions.

Near the beginning of the pandemic, IDOC waived the practice of entirely restricting communications based on grade level, which indicates that such restrictions are not necessary for prison security. Further, apart from attorney-client calls and privileged mail, all communications from people in prison can be monitored. **JHA believes that restricting communications as a punishment should be discontinued as a practice permanently.** Maintaining connections with loved ones and accessing information should not be treated as “privileges” that can be taken away. **This form of punishment is not only unnecessary, it is likely counterproductive to the goal of rehabilitation.** For example, a [2014 study](#) of women in prison found that regular calls with loved ones was consistently associated with reductions in recidivism. When people are able to receive support from family and friends, they become more committed to their success and are more likely to engage in activities and behaviors to promote it. Isolation, on the other hand, can cause feelings of hopelessness and, in some cases, may encourage the same behaviors that led to the initial grade demotion.

# Information Access

The ability to access information is crucial to people in custody. Incarceration is a profoundly isolating experience not only due to the lack of contact with loved ones, but also due to the lack of access to information. Issues with accessing information is one of the most common reasons individuals in custody write to JHA. People write to JHA to request copies of IDOC policies, legislation, case law, and other information important to their legal rights. Requests for information are often accompanied by reports of not being able to access the law library, or the information not being available in the law library. Individuals in custody are also frequently unable to access information that is important for success upon release, such as information related to housing and employment. Some people may gain information about the outside world by watching TV, which are available in some dayrooms and can usually be purchased from commissary for personal use, but JHA often receives reports that the cable is down. Reentry rooms, which were first [implemented](#) at IDOC prisons in 2020, typically have computers that people in custody may use to gather information about jobs, housing, transportation, etc., but these are often not accessible until just before a person is to be released.

JHA also receives reports of issues with the dissemination of information within prisons. For example, people write that they are not regularly updated about matters important to people in custody, such as water testing results, or changes in rules and procedures. This information is often disseminated via memos or through televisions, which typically have an institutional television channel. **Communicating this information is important so that people in prison can better understand situations and manage expectations.** Being left in the dark about such matters leads to frustration as people struggle to determine what information is accurate. For example, during JHA's September 2022 visit to Decatur, several people in custody reported that they were not informed when Legionella was detected in some of the housing units. This lack of communication caused anxiety, as these women then wondered what else they were not being informed of. During JHA and WJI's focus group, women also voiced that the lack of communication about prison procedures caused stress. For example, one woman said that the only way one could add phone numbers to their phone list upon intake was to either have all numbers memorized or write them in a Bible, which they were allowed to bring into the prison. Women who were incarcerated for the first time would have no way of knowing this, which impeded their ability to make calls because, with the widespread use of smart phones, few people have phone numbers committed to memory. Regular and open communication within

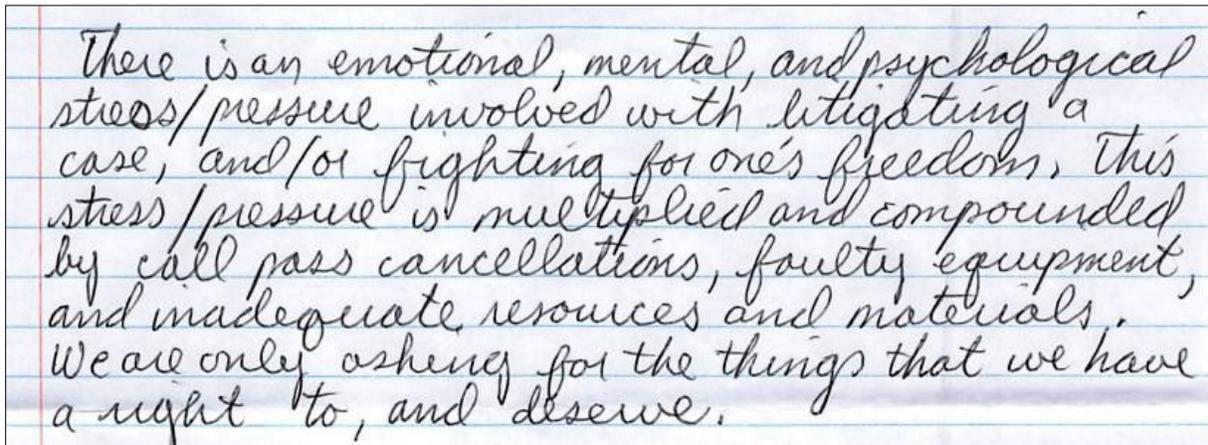
prisons is important for building trust, which is crucial to maintaining positive relationships between staff and incarcerated people.

Due to barriers to accessing information inside prisons, many people in custody rely on outside supports to obtain information for them. IDOC's [Constituent Services](#) office was established in part to provide information related to IDOC to community members. The office has introduced a Family Liaison position, established by [Public Act 102-0535](#) in August 2021, and the Family Liaison's role is to address the needs and concerns of the family members of individuals in custody. The 2022 Constituent Services [report](#) provides an overview of some of the issues community members have contacted the office about.

## Memos

Memos are a common way that prison administrators convey important information to individuals in custody. They are used to communicate relevant policies and recent changes, document incidents or events, issue directives, and give updates on ongoing situations within the prison and the IDOC. In addition to posting memos in community areas, some prisons publish memos via tablets. During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, IDOC published memos shared with incarcerated people on its [website](#), but the practice has since ceased. **JHA recommends that memos about issues affecting the entire IDOC population as well as those specific to certain facilities be regularly published to the IDOC website so that outside stakeholders are also able to access this information.**

## Law Libraries

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "There is an emotional, mental, and psychological stress/pressure involved with litigating a case, and/or fighting for one's freedom. This stress/pressure is multiplied and compounded by call pass cancellations, faulty equipment, and inadequate resources and materials. We are only asking for the things that we have a right to, and deserve." The paper has a vertical red margin line on the left and horizontal blue lines.

There is an emotional, mental, and psychological stress/pressure involved with litigating a case, and/or fighting for one's freedom. This stress/pressure is multiplied and compounded by call pass cancellations, faulty equipment, and inadequate resources and materials. We are only asking for the things that we have a right to, and deserve.

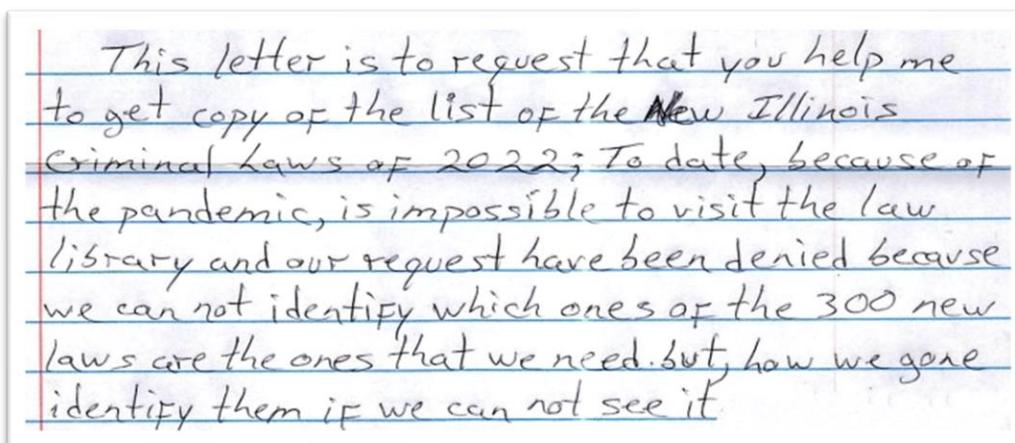
—Individual in Custody at East Moline, September 2022

People in custody require regular access to adequate libraries in order to conduct research related to their legal rights. Many incarcerated people represent themselves *pro se* in civil cases or criminal appeals, and access to legal materials is essential to advocate for themselves in court. Law libraries are also frequently used to access rules and policies relevant to rights while incarcerated, such as the Administrative Directives. Policies related to COVID-19, such as quarantine procedures, were also frequently sought by people in custody. Lack of access to law libraries—or access only to an inadequate range of materials—can therefore be highly stressful to people in custody. Requests for information such as statutes, court cases, and IDOC documents is one of the most common reasons people write to JHA, with many people noting in their letters that they had tried and failed to obtain such materials from their prison's law library. JHA's 2019 [Special Report](#) on Access to the Court and Adequate Law Library goes into detail about the importance of adequate law libraries and areas for improvement.

### Access to Law Libraries

Many people reported in JHA [2020 COVID-19 Surveys](#) that law library access had been heavily restricted or denied entirely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout 2023, JHA continued to receive reports of restricted law library access. This is understandably frustrating to individuals in custody, especially when they observe that other prison services are functioning as normal. One person from Danville wrote in June 2022, *“there has been an ongoing blatant deceptive disregard in allowing us access to the law library here at Danville. They have been consistent in using COVID as an excuse when in fact we have not been on any kind of*

*lockdown/movement restrictions.*” Several people report that they have only been able to use the law library once a month. Access to the law library is often prioritized based on upcoming court deadlines, which means that people who want to do research for potential *pro se* lawsuits, obtain copies of grievances, etc., are left waiting for long periods of time. While it is important that people with court deadlines are given access to law libraries, the needs of others to use the library should not be dismissed. People in custody also may have other time constraints, such as statutory deadlines to file complaints or petitions.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "This letter is to request that you help me to get copy of the list of the New Illinois Criminal Laws of 2022; To date, because of the pandemic, is impossible to visit the law library and our request have been denied because we can not identify which ones of the 300 new laws are the ones that we need. but, how we gone identify them if we can not see it." The note is written on blue-lined paper with a red margin line on the left side.

This letter is to request that you help me to get copy of the list of the New Illinois Criminal Laws of 2022; To date, because of the pandemic, is impossible to visit the law library and our request have been denied because we can not identify which ones of the 300 new laws are the ones that we need. but, how we gone identify them if we can not see it.

—Individual in Custody at Shawnee, January 2022

When people are able to use the law library, they are usually given only an hour, sometimes less, to conduct their research. This is often not enough time to identify the needed document, read it, and take notes. Individuals therefore will make copies of materials to read in their cells, which can be expensive. Other times, people in custody are prohibited from copying items for unclear reasons. For example, we received a letter from someone at Pinckneyville in April 2022 stating that the prison reportedly had a policy against making copies of Administrative Directives or Illinois Administrative Codes. **If prisons are unable to allocate enough time for people to conduct their research in the library, copies of documents should be permitted and made affordable to ensure that people are not denied the opportunity to conduct their research at all. Prisons should also consider training more individuals in custody to be law clerks in order to expedite library services such as making copies and finding materials.** Law clerk training is not only valuable for people while they are in custody, giving them the tools to advocate for themselves and others, but it is also an employable skill set upon release.

When prisons are not heavily restricting out-of-cell time in response to COVID, reported staff shortages and a failure to cover staff absences can impede access to law libraries. For example, an individual at East Moline wrote to JHA in August 2022 that their librarian took maternity leave, and the library was closed for over three weeks because no one had been found to cover her absence. **While addressing staff shortages has been a challenge for IDOC prisons, administrative staff must ensure that individuals in custody continue to have access to library services, particularly when they know staff will be**

**absent.** Law library access is not a privilege that people can go without for extended periods of time; it is foundational to ensuring access to the courts.

Some of the law libraries in IDOC prisons are inaccessible to people with disabilities, such as those located on an upper floor with no elevator access. For example, one person wrote to JHA from Illinois River in December 2022, requesting information about the time limit for administrative responses to emergency grievances. He wrote, *“Due to my inability to climb stairs I cannot get to the law library to find out what the ‘time limit’ period is.”* This individual also wrote that they submitted request slips for this information to the law library, but he received the incorrect information. Because law libraries are a central source of information for people in custody, they must be made accessible to all. **As IDOC considers infrastructure improvements—and potential prison closures—it should ensure that all prisons are accessible. In the interim, prison staff must guarantee that people who cannot physically access law libraries are still able to obtain the information they need. Providing everyone with tablets with legal research capabilities would allow people in custody to conduct their research from dayrooms, or even their cells if Wi-Fi signals allow.** This would not only improve access to law libraries for people with limited mobility, but also reduce demand on libraries and allow for extended in-person use. Legal research capabilities should thus be considered if IDOC decides to renegotiate their GTL contract or solicit bids from a new contractor.

**“These closures [of the law library] have in turn resulted in inmates procedurally defaulting due to the fact that they cannot research issues, and make the required copies to submit it to the court, as the LL is the only means we have for making copies.”**

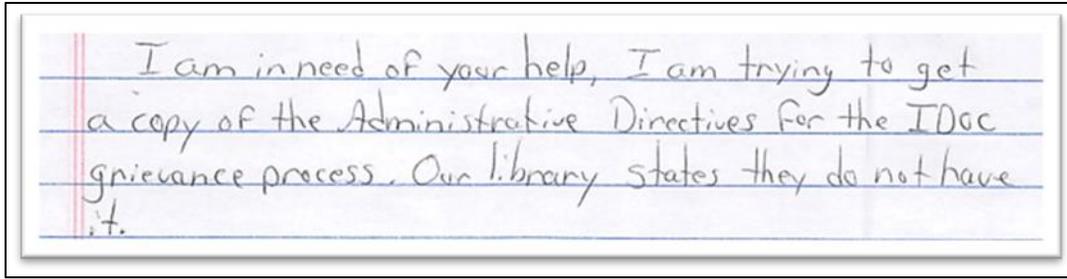
*—Individual in Custody at East Moline,  
August 2022*

## Adequacy of Law Libraries

Many IDOC prisons lack the necessary legal materials for individuals in custody to adequately pursue claims. Resources such as Federal Reporters and the Illinois Compiled Statutes are sometimes missing or damaged. Other resources may be available, but out-of-date. For example, someone from Western Illinois wrote to JHA in December 2022 requesting copies of several Administrative Directives. They wrote, *“Although I am certain some of these requests may be searchable by my family, the IDOC does not make it easy to locate. And the law library here at WICC does not maintain the most up-to-date versions of Administrative Directives, if it has them at all. That is surprising when my father can access the same Directive, not redacted and also current.”* JHA was pleased to see that IDOC began adding the Administrative Directives to their [website](#) in early 2022, as people can now print and send copies of these policies to their loved ones in prison.

**It is still important, however, to have these documents available in the library for those who cannot obtain them from outside sources.** We occasionally hear from people in custody that they are advised by library staff to write to JHA for documents, while JHA believes people are entitled to many of the documents they are seeking, the organization does not have the capacity to provide these to everyone that requests them. **Regular audits of law libraries should be conducted to verify that frequently requested materials are available and up-to-date.** Simple efforts such as ensuring a Table of Contents that reflects policy update dates is available online and in facilities, would likely be very helpful.

The United States Supreme Court held in *Bounds v. Smith* (1977) that “the fundamental constitutional right of access to the courts requires prison authorities to assist inmates in the preparation and filing of meaningful legal papers by providing prisoners with adequate law libraries or adequate assistance from persons trained in the law.” For more information on what is constitutionally required of prisons, see JHA’s [Special Report](#) on Access to the Court and Adequate Law Library.



I am in need of your help, I am trying to get a copy of the Administrative Directives for the IDOC grievance process. Our library states they do not have it.

—Individual in Custody at Taylorville, December 2022

Faulty technology in law libraries is also an area of concern. Legal research kiosks available in prison libraries, provided through IDOC's contract with GTL, are frequently reported to be malfunctioning, broken, or slow. An individual from Menard wrote in June 2022 that their legal kiosk *"takes 20 minutes to look up one case."* Someone from East Moline wrote to JHA in September 2022, *"For several weeks, the Lexis Nexis kiosks were inoperable. Then, once the kiosks were working, the printer was out of order, and it has been for at least two months now."* Because time in libraries is frequently very limited, slow and malfunctioning equipment is understandably frustrating to individuals in custody. **Regular maintenance of equipment should be conducted, and issues with library technology should be addressed promptly.**

# Proposed Pilots

## Phone Access on Tablets

Per IDOC's [response](#) to JHA's 2019 Communications Issues report, adding additional phones to dayrooms is not feasible in many IDOC prisons due to infrastructure issues with outdated cabling. However, there are other avenues for combating phone scarcity that can be pursued.

**One option JHA has advocated for is to add phone access to tablets.** This initiative has continued to be proposed by many individuals in custody via their MPQL survey responses. For example, one individual at Dixon wrote on their survey that *“placing the phone capability on the tablets will take away the power of the gangs to control the phones, consequently significantly decreasing the violence within the prison.”* It was also suggested by several of the women in the JHA/WJI focus group discussion. Other state prison systems have added phone access to tablets and seen positive effects on phone competition and the mental health of people in custody, including [Washington](#), [Colorado](#), [South Dakota](#), [Alabama](#), [Texas](#), and [Indiana](#). It is our understanding that IDOC continues to struggle with finalizing a contract to both provide tablets and update the Wi-Fi inside prisons, many of which are old and not conducive to wiring for modern technology.

**Ideally, IDOC would be able to provide tablets to everyone, for adding a phone app to tablets would have several benefits.** Calls could be made from cells or sleeping areas rather than just common areas like dayrooms (Wi-Fi signals permitting), allowing people to make calls even when movement is restricted. Phone lines would be freed up for those who do not yet have tablets, reducing competition over phone use. Adding phones to tablets could ease concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19 and other illnesses as fewer people would be passing phones back and forth. Phone access on tablets could also have a [positive effect](#) on mental health by increasing communication with family and friends. Further,

**“Phone calls are 20 minutes, we come out for 2 hours. Every shift, with 8 phones, that is enough time for only 48 people to make calls, and that is if we come out on time for our recreational time and everyone gets through on the first dial. We need more phones. Maybe put the phone on the tablets, that would help a lot.”**

*—Individual in Custody at Danville,  
2022*

security would not be a concern, as calls and messages from tablets can be monitored like regular phone calls.

Phone apps on tablets are not a perfect solution to the issue of phone scarcity in prisons, however. Some cells lack Wi-Fi signals, meaning that calls could only be made during out-of-cell time until Wi-Fi issues can be addressed. The cost of tablets is also a barrier to many people in custody; per information provided by IDOC in October 2022, a GTL tablet costs \$124.99, not including additional fees for services. It should also be noted that increased phone access means that there will be more demand on staff to monitor calls. Despite these issues, competition over phone lines would still be reduced and opportunities for more regular contact with loved ones would be enhanced.

**IDOC could consider piloting the addition of phone access to tablets at select facilities.**

The two IDOC women's prisons are strong candidates for such a pilot. In addition to being a small percentage of the IDOC population (approximately [five percent](#)), women may particularly benefit from increased access to phones. Regular communication with loved ones is vital to most incarcerated people, but women are more likely to have children who rely on them while incarcerated. Per a 2023 [report](#) by the Prison Policy Initiative, approximately 58% of women in prison are parents to minor children, and, according to a 2021 [report](#) by the Women's Justice Institute, 77% of mothers in state prisons nationwide who lived with their children just prior to incarceration were the primary caregiver (compared to 26% of fathers in state prisons).<sup>3</sup>

Preserving parental relationships is beneficial to the well-being of both parent and child, and encourages a forward-looking mindset for reentry and reunification preparation. **Again, it is crucial that all incarcerated people are able to communicate with the outside world, and phone access on tablets should eventually be made available to all.** However, piloting this functionality at the women's prisons would allow for a test-run of phone capabilities while protecting familial relationships. **Further, IDOC should make tablets free for individuals in custody, as current costs (\$124.99 per tablet, not including fees for messaging and subscriptions) are prohibitive for many.**

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<sup>3</sup> REDEFINING THE NARRATIVE, The Women's Justice Institute, Apr. 28, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/ya4wewth>, at 5C.9.

## Free phone calls

Toward the beginning of the pandemic, IDOC stated that people in custody would be provided two free phone calls per week. As detailed in our [2020 COVID-19 Prison Survey Comment Report](#), this initiative had mixed results, with 61.7% of JHA survey respondents reporting that they had not received a free phone call in the week prior to responding to the survey. Though the pandemic continues to affect prison communications, the practice of providing free phone calls has been discontinued. **There have been initiatives in other states to make calls from prison free; California and Connecticut succeeded at implementing [free phone calls from prison](#) in 2022, and Illinois should consider doing the same.** The cost of this initiative should not be a major barrier, though it is difficult to give an estimate of costs without more information on the IDOC budget. As a point of comparison, it will cost California \$12 million a year to provide free phone calls (instead of charging 2.5 cents per call), which is only [.1% of California's overall prison budget](#). It should also be noted that Illinois has a much smaller prison population than California, with [29,910](#) people in custody in May 2023 compared to California's [96,318](#).

**Phone calls are an essential means of contact with the outside world for people in custody, and they should not be denied due to a lack of funds.** As with adding phone capabilities to tablets, the IDOC women's prisons would be ideal for piloting free phone calls, as women in prison are more likely to have dependent family members who would benefit from increased communication. A [2021 report](#) by the Women's Justice Institute notes that most women in Illinois prisons do not have jobs (42% of Logan's population had jobs in 2021) and therefore receive only \$13 a month from state pay, unless they have additional funding from outside supports.<sup>4</sup> Under current phone rates, if an individual in custody makes one 20-minute phone call each day, they will spend over \$5 a month on phone calls alone. This initiative has been suggested by other advocacy organizations as well; per a [report](#) by the Correctional Association of New York, "Incarcerated mothers should have access to free telephone services, on a supervised basis, so that they can establish and maintain contact with their children and their children's caretakers and service providers."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 5D.42

<sup>5</sup> WHEN "FREE" MEANS LOSING YOUR MOTHER: THE COLLISION OF CHILD WELFARE AND THE INCARCERATION OF WOMEN IN NEW YORK STATE, Women in Prison Project of the Correctional Association of New York, February 2006, <https://tinyurl.com/3ysmnwn3>, at 39.



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](mailto: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](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. We also thank the Women's Justice Institute, Maria Garza, and Victoria Rose for their support and contributions to this report.

