
Facility Report



Monitoring Visit to Decatur Correctional Center 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Key Findings	3
Recommendations	4
Population	4
Women’s Division	4
Decatur	6
Programs	8
Staff Issues	11
Mail Delays	14

Introduction

When JHA visited Decatur on March 19, 2024, the population was 261, which was down from 401 at the time of JHA's previous visit in October 2022. This report is an update to JHA's [2022 Decatur Monitoring Report](#).

The visit occurred in the wake of [Governor Pritzker's March 15, 2024 announcement](#) of plans to [close Logan](#) (IDOC's only other women's prison) and to build a new women's prison in [Will County](#) within three to five years of the March 2024 announcement. Logan is located 35 miles from Decatur; it houses people with higher security classification and mental health needs than Decatur, and also is where all IDOC female intake is conducted. As the Governor's plan for closing and rebuilding Logan develop, JHA will continue to weigh in and advocate for an approach that includes developing smaller facilities that are safe, humane, geographically sensible, and which can better meet the individualized needs of people who are incarcerated and incorporate gender responsive policies, practices, and living conditions. JHA will also continue to monitor and report on all facilities that house people in state custody in Illinois.

Key Findings

- In March 2024, Decatur was at 41% of its rated capacity, and three of its eight housing units were not occupied.
- Administrators were confident the prison could safely house additional individuals in custody from Logan.
- Decatur was well placed to incorporate additional reentry programming, including work release and additional vocational programming.
- Those incarcerated at Decatur continued to report delays in receiving both personal and legal mail, which apparently stemmed from a staff vacancy in the mailroom.
- Inability to participate in substance abuse programming without a separate mental health diagnosis was cited as a negative by people at Decatur who felt they could benefit from the treatment but did not meet the dual diagnosis eligibility criteria.

Recommendations

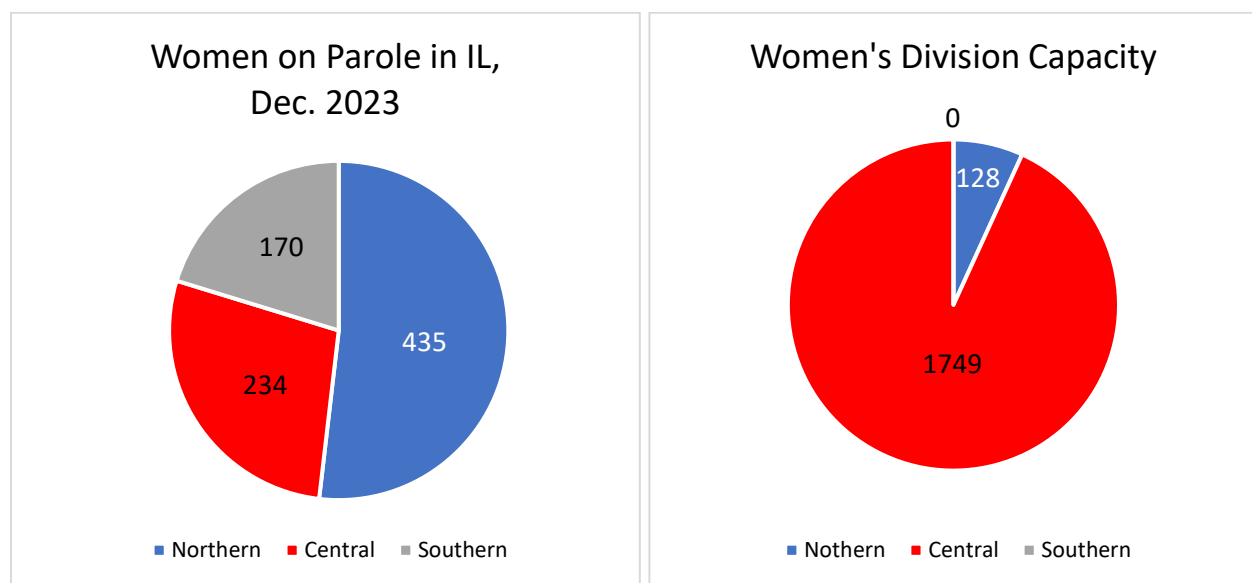
- Release people who can be safely and more productively housed in the community via existing mechanisms, particularly those close to release, including through the use of sentencing credits.
- Take advantage of existing capacity within IDOC to house those in the women’s division, ensuring appropriate staffing levels prior to increasing the population at Decatur. Consider use of other facilities to house those who cannot be housed at Decatur due to security concerns.
- Take advantage of Logan’s closure to consolidate resources at Decatur, such as vocational programs and staff—especially female security staff.
- Work with local community and nearby industries to offer work release opportunities.
- Prioritize staffing the mailroom to allow mail to be processed in a timely manner regardless of staffing vacancies.
- Identify and put in place substance use disorder treatment programs that will allow people without a dual diagnosis to participate; helping people better manage issues with substance use prior to release will improve release outcomes and ease reentry.

Population

Women’s Division

According to IDOC’s [2023 Female Population Data Factsheet](#), the women’s division’s population—made up of Decatur; Logan, a multi-level prison in Lincoln; and Fox Valley, an Adult Transition Center (ATC) in Aurora—was 1,533 at the end of 2023. This was higher than the women’s division’s reported populations in 2020 through 2022, but was otherwise the lowest reported end-of-year population count since 1992. The combined rated capacity—the number of people a facility can hold in permanent housing—of all three facilities excluding Reception & Classification (R&C) at Logan was 2,196 as of [February 2024](#), meaning the women’s division as a whole was at 70% capacity. As of February 2024, 451 of the 755 empty beds within the women’s division were located at Decatur. Overall, IDOC was operating at 74% of its rated capacity in February 2024, with more than 10,000 empty beds across all facilities.

Both of IDOC's female prisons are located in Central Illinois. However, according to IDOC's [December 2023 Parole Population Data Set](#), 52% of women on parole from IDOC resided in Northern Illinois and 20% resided in Southern Illinois. While Fox Valley is located in Northern Illinois, its rated capacity is 123 and people can only be housed there during the last three years of their sentence. The parole population-by-location percentages suggest that many people incarcerated at Logan and Decatur are housed far from their homes and families in Northern and Southern Illinois. A person's ability to maintain contact with their family and community while incarcerated generally eases their reentry transition and reduces recidivism. Moreover, having only one ATC for women limits opportunities provided by work release programs: the ability to gain employment, save money, and more slowly reintegrate back into a person's family and community. Further, the location of the lone ATC for women also means that it cannot provide ongoing post-release opportunities for women not returning to Northern Illinois.



While JHA supports IDOC's decision to close Logan given its major infrastructure issues (detailed in JHA's [2022-23 Logan Monitoring Report](#)), the excessive amount of empty space within IDOC's existing prisons draws attention to the wastefulness and redundancy in rebuilding prisons, particularly without closing some of the most unsafe and decrepit facilities, which require hundreds of millions of dollars to address infrastructure issues. The [CGL Facility Master Plan Final Report](#) commissioned by IDOC recommended utilizing Illinois River, a medium-security men's prison with a rated capacity of 1,881, for the female population. IDOC could also more fully utilize Decatur—which at the time of JHA's 2024 visit, was operating at 41% of its

rated capacity of 676—which would enable the transfer of Logan’s population in the immediate, providing the people incarcerated there with more humane living conditions.

Decatur

At the time of the 2024 visit, five of the prison’s eight housing units were occupied. Two housing units were closed for renovations (including floor tile replacement, installation of additional cameras, and painting), and one was serving as a possible COVID-19 isolation wing and not inhabited. In May 2024, administrators reported that camera installation had been completed on three housing units, one of which had been reopened to support an increased population.

Documents provided by IDOC dated March 4, 2024 reflect that 99.6% of Decatur’s population (257) was minimum-security, with only one person there classified as medium. In

comparison, according to documents received at the time of JHA’s [December 2022 visit to Logan](#), 36% of Logan’s population was classified as minimum-security, 53% was classified as medium, and 11% was classified as maximum. Despite Decatur’s minimum-security designation, an administrator who spoke with JHA believed that the prison could house those with higher-level security classifications there given adequate staffing, and pointed out that when Decatur originally opened as a prison, it was designated medium-security. Reportedly, those classified above minimum were already housed at Decatur at times when they could not be housed at Logan. While transfer to Decatur has historically been restricted based on offense class because of the presence of children inside the prison as part of the Moms & Babies and Family Reunification programs, administrators said that anytime a child was moved within the prison, all other movement stopped so that people could be kept apart if needed.

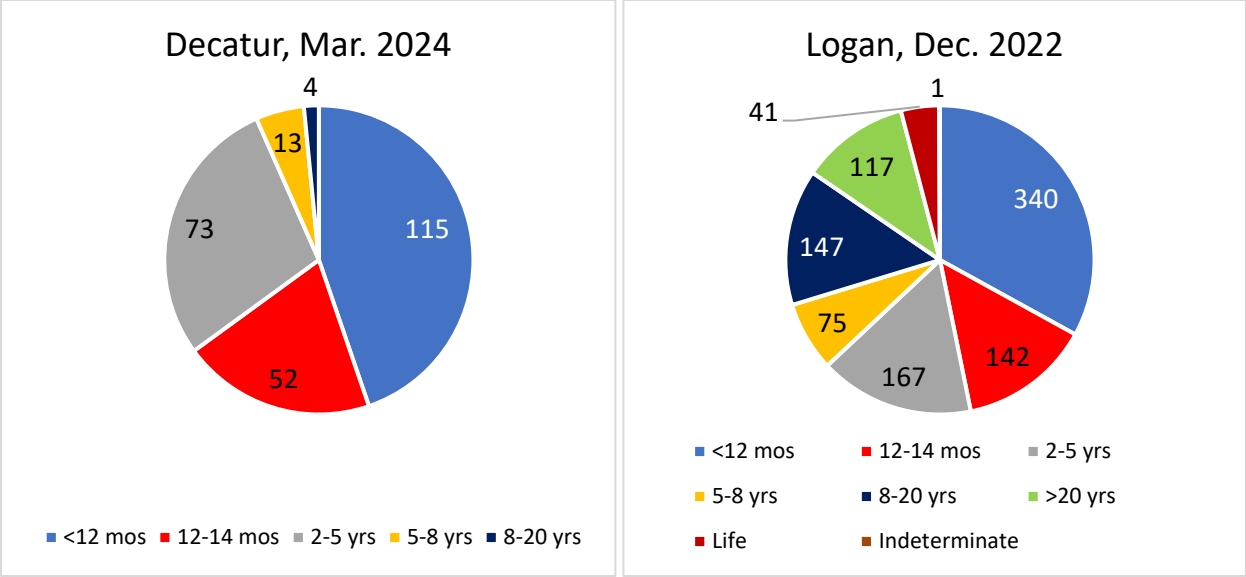
Administrators also expressed that they felt Decatur was well set up to house trans people, many of whom are incarcerated at Logan. Reportedly, Decatur had housed both trans men and

While those at Decatur were generally lower security than those incarcerated at Logan, IDOC’s [April 2024 Quarterly Report](#) indicates that the offenses for which people at Decatur were incarcerated varied. 17% of Decatur’s population were serving time for murder or a Class X offense as of February 2024.

trans women in the past, including two trans men not long before the 2024 visit. Administrators explained that each housing unit had one room with its own shower, which was where trans people might be housed when they were at Decatur.

According to the [April 2024 IDOC Quarterly Report](#), there were 233 women incarcerated at Decatur with 443 available beds. There were 1,163 people incarcerated at Logan, meaning nearly 40% of Logan's population could be housed in existent housing units at Decatur. Fox Valley had a rated capacity of 123 and a population of 118, both making it an option with limited utility for housing additional people as well as demonstrating the demand for reentry opportunities within the Women's Division.

Documents provided to JHA showed that **45% of Decatur's population as of March 3, 2024 had less than a year left to serve before the application of sentencing credits.** A further 20% had two years or less. More opportunities for Earned Program Sentencing Credits (EPSC), more generous use of Earned Discretionary Sentencing Credits (EDSC), and more ATC capacity within the Women's Division could open up a significant amount of additional space at Decatur. Documents provided to JHA in December 2022 likewise indicated that 34% of Logan's population had less than a year left to serve, and a further 14% had two years or less. Those with less than six months left to serve are limited in programming opportunities and therefore limited in their ability to earn EPSC, making the application of EDSC particularly important for meaningfully decreasing the population within the Women's Division. Administrators reported in May 2024 that they were releasing individuals or transferring them to work release almost as quickly as they were able to transfer new people into Decatur, and that they were applying sentencing credits whenever possible. The charts below show time left to serve before the application of sentence credits at the time of JHA's most recent visit to each prison:



Programs

Decatur administrators reported that they recently hired a second GED instructor, allowing them to add another class. IDOC's [April 2024 Quarterly Report](#) reflected that as of February 2024, 120 total people (or 52% of the population at Decatur) were enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE), Advanced ABE, or Adult Secondary Education (ASE). In comparison, 141 people (or 13% of the population at Logan excluding those in R&C) were enrolled in such educational programming.

JHA spoke to several women at Decatur who were or had been in school. One person said most people who had been on the waitlist to get into school had gotten in recently, including some with long sentences. Because IDOC prioritizes people for programming based on outdate, those with long sentences often spend years on program waitlists, continually being pushed back by those with short sentences.

Someone told JHA during the visit that she had attended some college before her incarceration, but because she had scored below an 8 on the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE), she was unable to participate in vocational programming until she completed Advanced ABE, which she could not get into because she had too many years left to serve. She expressed that if she had had a week or two to study algebra and geometry, she could have tested high enough to participate in college-level programming, and she was frustrated that she had to wait to retake high school classes when she had already graduated from high school and attended college. **JHA urges IDOC to increase use of tutoring and retesting to increase opportunities.**

Administrators reported that Milliken University was offering evening college academic classes for which people could earn credits towards an associate's degree with 10 enrolled at the time of the visit. Vocational programming at Decatur is offered through [Lake Land College](#).

Administrators reported that at the time of the visit, there were available programs in horticulture, manufacturing, and warehousing. The prison had reportedly offered career technologies and culinary arts, but had lost its instructors for those programs. Gaps in staffing for vocational programs could potentially be mitigated by consolidating Lake Land staff at Decatur after Logan's closure. While Logan did not have a culinary arts program as of February 2024, it did have a career technologies instructor who could potentially be relocated. Decatur had also been lacking a Cosmetologist or someone to run the Beauty Shop for 8-9 months, and was reportedly working with Logan to try to get some services.

Administrators were also interested in starting a custodial arts program, which is offered through Lake Land at some of IDOC's other prisons. The [April 2024 Quarterly Report](#) indicates that 18 people were enrolled in vocational programming at Decatur in February 2024, or 8% of the 233 people who were incarcerated at Decatur at the time. In comparison, 2% of the 1,090 people incarcerated at Logan were enrolled in vocational programming during the same time period. Someone incarcerated at Decatur expressed concern that the prison offered few programs designed to train people to enter high-paying fields, and believed that this led to increased recidivism among women, especially those who were younger.

At the time of the 2024 JHA visit, Decatur offered Lake Land programs in manufacturing and warehousing, which had four and eight students respectively as of [February 2024](#). These programs were fairly new, as discussed in [JHA's prior Decatur report](#). An instructor for this program was enthusiastic about the holistic approach of the program, the level of support he could offer his students (particularly with regards to the more academic focused part of the program), and the state-of-the-art machines that the women were learning on, which he felt would prepare them for several different skilled positions that are in high demand in outside workplaces. JHA witnessed a student practicing for an upcoming exam with a forklift and saw three others working on bookwork in an adjoining classroom. Reportedly 15 people had completed this programming and instructors wanted to reach the enrollment capacity of 10, but stated they did not have that many people eligible with the required time and the required GED or high school diploma and 8.0 TABE test score. They also noted the difficulty people have in obtaining transcripts.

Administrators told JHA that they were hoping to start offering work release opportunities to women while they were still incarcerated at Decatur. They reported that the facility was in a good location to offer work release to graduates of the manufacturing and warehousing programs because of the jobs in those industries located nearby at companies like Caterpillar, and that they believed the surrounding community would be supportive of work release programming for the women at the facility.

The town of Decatur previously had an ATC, which was [closed in 2013](#). Offering work release at Decatur would be valuable to the women in IDOC custody, particularly for those not returning to the Chicagoland area. As mentioned above, the only facility offering work release to women is Fox Valley, which limits the release benefits geographically for many of the women in IDOC – given that [in 2023](#) almost half the women on parole were located in Central or Southern Illinois.

Decatur offers dual diagnosis substance use disorder and mental health treatment through [WestCare](#). The program reportedly had a capacity of 26 and was housed on its own wing; in addition, some people who were on the waitlist for the program were also housed on the wing. Participants in the program described it as being similar to rehab in the community and some spoke highly of the WestCare counselors, who they said were *“really there to help you.”* A participant showed JHA visitors the packet she had been assigned, which she said was

personalized to things her counselor thought she needed to work on. Some participants reported having been on the waitlist between two and seven months before getting into the program. Administrators reported in May 2024 that they were hoping to be able to double the number of treatment beds at the facility but did not yet have a timeline.

JHA also spoke with a group of women who had just transferred from Logan on the day of the visit. Some pointed out that while substance use disorder treatment that was not dual diagnosis was available at Logan, it was not available at Decatur. They expressed concern that they would not be able to receive this programming at Decatur because they did not have a dual diagnosis, which JHA shared with administrators. At the March IDOC Advisory Board meeting, IDOC administrators said that they were looking into providing non-dual diagnosis substance use disorder programming at Decatur. Administrators also said during the visit that peer-led Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous were available at the prison, and added during the report review that education programs (such as Helping Women Recover) were also available to those without a dual diagnosis.

Staff Issues

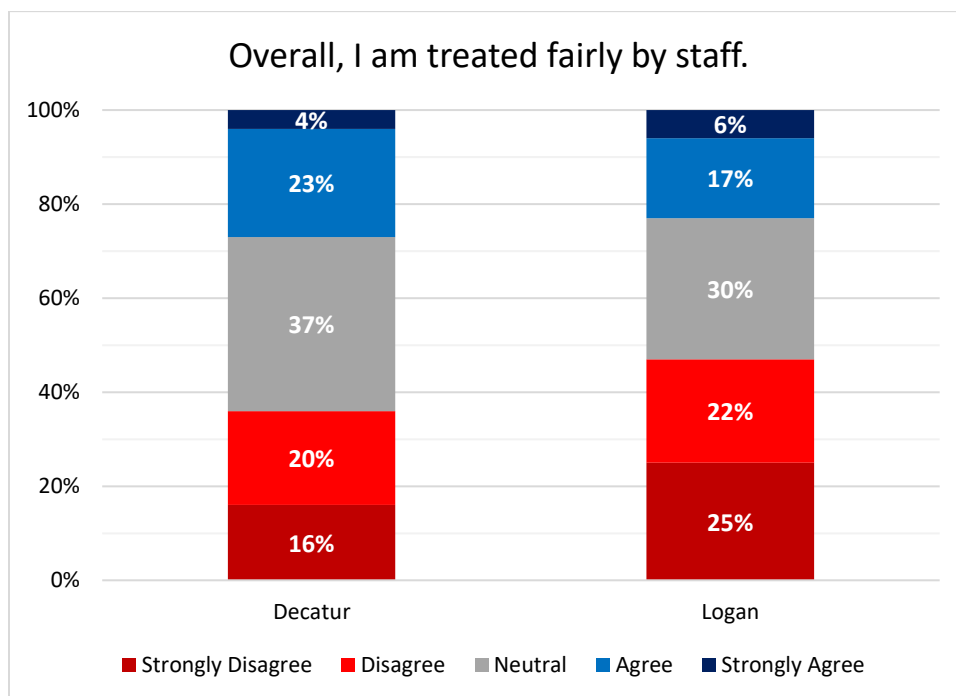
As at Logan and during prior Decatur visits, during the March 2024 JHA Decatur visit, incarcerated people gave mixed reports about their relationships with staff. One person said that officers treated individuals in custody like they were “*shit*,” and she believed they had the mentality that incarcerated people were less valuable because they were incarcerated. Someone else said that a staff member who oversaw the commissary was rude, disrespectful, and accused her of not having put in a commissary slip when she had done so as an excuse not to serve her. However, she also reported that other staff would not bother her if she did not bother them. A third person who spoke with JHA on the visit said that 90% of the staff were “*pretty good*” but that they were often misinformed, which caused bad information to disseminate throughout the prison when someone asked a staff member a question and was given the wrong answer.

Responses to JHA’s [Measuring the Quality of Prison Life \(MQPL\) survey](#), which was conducted at Decatur in late 2022, demonstrated concerns about staff. In response to a question about the most negative things about Decatur, one respondent wrote, “*Some of the COs [Correctional*

Officers] are degrading, mean and say inappropriate things.” Another said, *“Due to so many married couples or family members that work here, if one staff member gives you problems 10 more follow suit.”* A third respondent said, *“lack of staff effort to advise inmates on how to better their time and get home soonest.”* [JHA’s analysis](#) of the most commonly mentioned issues in response to this question indicated that 40% of Decatur survey respondents mentioned issues with staff. “Staff” was also the most common substantive word used in response to this question, appearing in nearly 30% of responses, with “C/O” also ranking in the top ten most commonly used words.

Concerns about staff treatment have been consistent at both of IDOC’s women’s prisons. JHA’s [MQPL comparative results](#) show that Decatur and Logan both scored below average for staff professionalism on JHA’s MQPL survey. However, Decatur scored in the top third of IDOC prisons in fairness, respect and courtesy, staff relationships, and humanity. On all four measures, Logan scored in the top 50% but below average.

On JHA’s MQPL survey, 27% of respondents from Decatur agreed with the phrase, “Overall, I am treated fairly by staff,” while 36% disagreed. In comparison, 23% of respondents at Logan agreed and 47% disagreed.



Like many IDOC prisons, administrators reported that Decatur was understaffed and had difficulty retaining staff when other state agencies (such as the Department of Child and Family Services) allowed employees to work from home and have access to their cellphones on the clock. According to the [April 2024 Quarterly Report](#), Decatur had an incarcerated person-to-security staff ratio of 2.6:1, which was well below IDOC's average of 3.7:1 and IDOC's minimum-security average of 3.5:1. It was also slightly below Logan's average of 2.8:1. MQPL survey respondents from Decatur also expressed concern about staffing levels. In response to a question asking respondents to suggest improvements, six survey respondents said that more staff was needed.

Staff at Decatur reported that out of approximately 87 security staff they had 37 female security staff (43%), including a major, two lieutenants, seven sergeants, and 27 correctional officers. Reportedly, the prison sometimes had to gender mandate during the late-night shift in order to ensure that there was a female security staff person present. Staff reported that they were not able to station a female officer on every housing unit because they were needed elsewhere—for example, in positions where searches were required. The United Nations' [Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#) Rule 81 dictates that “*No male staff member shall enter the part of the prison set aside for women unless accompanied by a woman staff member*” and that “*Women prisoners shall be attended and supervised only by women staff members...*” While housing units had a curtain at the entrance to the communal shower area, some women shared with JHA visitors that the absence of shower dividers made them uncomfortable in the prison and that they did not understand why they were not present. Someone stated that water from others showering splashed on her, in addition to reiterating privacy issues. Administrators stated dividers had been removed because of difficulty cleaning them. Some incarcerated people believed they were not allowed because of need for staff to be able to supervise shower areas. However, given room and bathroom configuration at Decatur, there are many areas that staff cannot supervise well and that male staff cannot supervise unannounced because women may be undressed.

Administrators also reported that in order to house an increased and higher-security population, Decatur would need more staff and, in particular, staff to supervise the prison's outer perimeter. This could possibly be achieved through consolidating staff between Decatur and Logan, after

Logan's closure. Such a consolidation would also help address issues caused by Decatur's

Muslim women at Decatur reported that during Ramadan they did not have access to dates in the evening when it was time to break their fast. When JHA raised the issue, administrators reported that according to IDOC policy, Muslims observing Ramadan could be provided one of several food items depending on supply at the prison, and that those observing Ramadan at Decatur were provided with a cookie to break their fast. However, administrators also said that because the number of people observing Ramadan at Decatur was so low, they could likely source dates from another prison.

inability to staff each housing unit with a female officer.

Mail Delays

[As on past visits](#), those incarcerated at Decatur reported personal and legal mail being processed slowly and distributed inconsistently. Someone who spoke with JHA on the 2024 visit said that her legal mail was often more than a week delayed and expressed concern about how mail processing delays would impact her ability to meet upcoming deadlines. She also reported that shortly before the March 19 visit, she had been given a stack of personal mail postdated from the first week of February. Another woman reported that she had been waiting on photographs that had been sent to her three months prior. Others agreed that when a piece of mail was returned to the sender for violating a rule, they were not informed. Someone also pointed out that envelopes coming from the facility being stamped with "Decatur Correctional Center," which is standard practice across state and federal prison and jail systems, could be off-putting to family members who may not want their mail carrier to see that they are receiving mail from someone who is in prison.

Decatur administrators told JHA that the mailroom clerk position had been vacant since its previous occupant had been promoted into another position. They explained that they could not

station an officer in the mailroom because the two positions were classified differently. Instead, staff were reportedly working overtime to clear the backlog of mail. On the day of the visit, administrators reported that an offer had been made to a candidate for the position. JHA has received concerns regarding mail delays since the visit. In May 2024, Decatur administrators told JHA that the mail room clerk position had been filled in April and that there had not been issues with mail delays since then.

Several women who spoke with JHA additionally reported that they were not regularly issued free write-outs (postage paid envelopes), which should be part of regularly monthly core hygiene distribution. They said that write-outs were only issued on intake and around Christmas. In May 2024, Decatur administrators reported that individuals received three free envelopes, which were distributed during commissary, and that those who did not go to commissary could request them. JHA cannot confirm or deny this and looks forward to monitoring it in the future.



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 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.

