Facility Report

Monitoring Visit to Pontiac Correctional Center 2023
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Introduction

The John Howard Association (JHA) conducted a monitoring visit to Pontiac Correctional Center (Pontiac) on November 15, 2023. JHA sent a draft of this report to IDOC on March 20, 2024 and draft review was conducted on May 2, 2024 and administrators requested additional time to provide a response received June 3, 2024. Pontiac is considered a maximum-security male prison within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), but it also houses individuals in custody from the closed Pontiac medium-security unit (MSU), individuals in mental health housing, and a large Protective Custody (PC) population. All populations were housed in the maximum-security part of the prison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pontiac population</th>
<th>Approx #</th>
<th># of JHA interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protective Custody (PC)</td>
<td>300¹</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Security Unit (MSU)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Mental Health (SMH)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioral Modification Unit (BMU) &amp; Modified Therapeutic Community (MTC)</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restrictive Housing (RH)²</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare Unit (HCU/Infirmary)</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Population Maximum Security</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>39 (6.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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According to data provided by IDOC the population of Pontiac at the time of the November visit was approximately 600 individuals in custody. This represents a significant reduction from nearly 1,200, or double the 2023 population numbers, at the time of JHA’s February 2020 pre-

¹ At the time of May 2, 2024 draft review, administrators reported there were 516 people in male maximum-security IDOC prisons considered on PC status (including individuals approved for PC and not), with 299 (58%) at Pontiac, 134 at Menard (26%), and 83 (16%) at Lawrence. This information was not publicly reported, which JHA recommended.

² At the request of IDOC officials, JHA did not conduct interviews in the restricted housing units during the 2023 visit due to a reported serious incident of self-harm in the early morning hours before the visit. IDOC requesting that JHA groups not visit specific housing areas is extremely unusual. However, JHA staff were offered the opportunity to individually visit the area at the end of the visit, which was declined. JHA spoke with some individuals in mental health housing who were on restrictive housing disciplinary status.
pandemic monitoring visit and from the previous JHA visit in May 2022 when it was 696. This reduction of Pontiac's population is in line with deliberate policies promoted by IDOC and as advised by a consultant. Pontiac has undergone significant population reduction and changes since prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of the MSU, and transfers of individuals in Administrative Detention status from the prison, as well as some transfers of maximum-security general population and PC individuals to Menard and Lawrence, as that prison becomes maximum-security. JHA visited Lawrence in May 2022 and October 2023 during this transition.

According to data provided by administrators, at the time of the 2023 JHA visit more than half of the population at Pontiac had a security classification lower than maximum-security and yet all but MSU-classified people were subject to restrictive practices, including minimal out-of-cell time and non-contact visitation.

![Population by race](chart.png)

![Population by security level](chart.png)

This report uses information from interviews, observations and materials provided from the Pontiac monitoring visit on November 15th, as well as survey data from JHA's Measuring the Quality of Life (MQPL) survey collected from Pontiac between March-July 2023. Information from 243 MQPL responses (representing approximately a third of the static population) is used to contextualize findings through scores of Likert Scale questions and in the use of open-ended responses, including to questions that asked people to identify the most positive and negative aspects of the prison. To better understand what issues were perceived to be the most important, some issue terms within open-ended responses were quantified. In addition to survey information, JHA logged and reviewed more than 45 other communications regarding Pontiac in 2023, with the most commonly raised issues being lack of information access, physical
conditions, and staff conduct, followed by issues with medical treatment and grievances. This report also uses administrative data from IDOC, including public sources such as Quarterly and Operations & Management Reports (OMRs).

Key Findings

1. **Out-of-cell time**: Significant improvements since JHA’s 2022 visit had been made to allow out-of-cell times for the lower security population of people formerly classified for Pontiac's MSU who have been housed in maximum-security units since the physical MSU’s closure. This was reported to be between four to five hours each day, which is still lower than some IDOC medium-security settings provide historically. However, in all other areas where interviews were conducted at Pontiac in November 2023 out-of-cell time was reported as less than 2 hours a day. This is insufficient according to United Nations minimum standards. In JHA 2023 MQPL Pontiac survey responses more than 90% of respondents said they were not getting more than two hours a day out-of-cell.

2. **Physical Plant Concerns**: In mid-2023, an independent assessment of infrastructure needs in IDOC was made public, reflecting substantial concerns at Pontiac, including $235 million in deferred maintenance, which was the second highest cost estimate after Stateville. In one particular physical plant concern, suspicion of the quality of water was again raised by both incarcerated people and staff during the Pontiac 2023 visit, as well as in population survey comments and other JHA contacts. People in custody also expressed a lack of trust in communication on the issue, as observed also at other IDOC prisons. Plumbing issues also continued to be reported and observed.

3. **Multi-Purpose Use**: Pontiac now has a majority protective custody and medium-security population. However, the infrastructure and operations at Pontiac continue to be more reflective of a restrictive disciplinary maximum-security prison, resulting in issues providing basic services for people in diverse classifications, including those with serious mental health needs.

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3 The report also states at p. 84 that Pontiac had nearly $285 million in deferred maintenance, administrators believed this figure may have included the MSU physical structure, which is closed.
4. **Non-Contact visits**: Contact visits were not permitted for incarcerated people in maximum-security classifications at Pontiac. In survey comments, many people identified non-contact visits as distressing, and a reason why their families did not visit.

5. **Phone access**: Incarcerated people cited that there were inadequate numbers of telephones for the population and too short usage windows to allow everyone access to phone calls. This affected incarcerated people with jobs especially seriously.

6. **Grievances and Law library**: Lack of faith in the grievance procedure continued to be a reported issue at Pontiac (as throughout IDOC) and data provided raised concerns regarding responsiveness. Further, people have lacked physical access to the law library since an attack on a staff member in February 2023. Although the administration has reportedly taken measures to offer law library services remotely, these did not adequately replicate physical access to the library.

7. **Programming**: Positive feedback was received on volunteer-facilitated Defy Ventures classes and some other programs. As throughout IDOC, people continued to desire more opportunities for productive and rehabilitative activity.

8. **Staffing**: While population numbers and needs had changed, Pontiac administrators reported vacancies of 54% of allotted security staff and 69% of allotted non-security staff. The administration was reportedly taking measures to have heavier staffing during the day, running shorter on night shifts. Despite the reported staffing challenges, administrators stated Pontiac has developed ways to improve staff morale such as better communication on decisions, inclusion of staff on multi-disciplinary committees promoting exchange between different staff sectors, and wellness initiatives.
Recommendations

1. The administration must find ways to increase out-of-cell time for incarcerated people.

2. Clear documentation of actions taken to improve physical plant conditions, e.g. addressing water quality in response to Illinois Environment Protection Agency’s (IEPA) notices of violation, should continue to be communicated via tablets and posted for the public, staff, and individuals in custody to better address the lack of trust.

3. IDOC should take advantage of the reduced population (71.2% of reported capacity in the Pontiac max unit November 2023) to increase the rate of single-cell occupancy and improve opportunities and provision of services.

4. Contact visits should be permitted for all incarcerated people, unless there is an individualized safety reason for a temporary restriction. Pontiac survey comments again highlighted the importance of contact visits for incarcerated people and their visitors. Further, visitation has been shown to improve other outcomes and IDOC should encourage, and not erect barriers to, visits.

5. To address to the problems around the availability of phones and the potential for tension that arises when phones are limited, IDOC should increase numbers of phones and hours of access, and work to facilitate allowing phone calls to be made on tablets.

6. IDOC must ensure appropriate responsiveness through the grievance process, as well as adequate access to law libraries and materials, and consider also implementing tablet grievance filing and tracking and legal research capacity.

7. IDOC should increase programming, including use of volunteer-led initiatives, which may have an additional benefit of allowing eligible individuals to earn sentencing credit.

8. Illinois and IDOC must comprehensively evaluate population and staffing needs to best use available resources, entailing consolidation and closure decisions, and recommit to providing more humane living and working conditions for those who remain.
Treatment, Discipline and Grievances

Treatment

Compared to previous JHA visits in May 2022 and February 2020, relatively few complaints about treatment by staff were heard during the November 2023 Pontiac visit; however, restrictive housing areas were not visited. Generally given survey comments and other communications received by JHA, it does seem that fewer serious and specific concerns regarding staff were raised to our attention from Pontiac, which may also relate to lowered and changed populations. In draft review, IDOC administrators again stressed that they believed significant changes had been made at Pontiac over the past few years and that they felt they had improved quality of services for individuals in custody and staff as well as culture and programming opportunities. They also felt they had built a team that cared and worked together with both individuals in custody and staff to come to solutions, and that this was reflected in external reviews.

During the visit, administrators described a lightened atmosphere and improved relationships between staff and incarcerated people. This had reportedly been achieved through reductions in population and by introducing measures such as including incarcerated people’s voices and introducing increased peer learning. One administrator stated that “we are now seeing the number of staff assaults we would see in a week in a month.” Quarterly reports showed four staff assaults in November, five in October, and four in September of 2023 compared to the same three months in 2022 with 20 in November, 14 in October, and 20 in September.

Comments from individual in custody interviews indicated some positive interactions with staff and some issues.

“Some days, staff are ok. Some days, they aren’t. They are just humans like us.”

“Pontiac is way better in terms of gang violence and staff assaults. It’s quieter here.”

Another incarcerated person specifically identified an improvement in relationships, as noted by administrators.

“There is less tension with staff now. You get what you give.”
Others identified some problematic staff behavior. One person said that staff will shake them down excessively if they stand up for themselves. Another said that he was having issues with a staff member who was denying him privileges without a disciplinary ticket. Another person described younger staff as being “unprofessional” and lacking training.

Survey results from Pontiac in 2023 showed only 8% of Pontiac respondents affirmatively responding to the statement “relationships between staff and incarcerated people are good” and 36% affirmatively responding to “I get along well with the officers on my unit.”

More than half, 53%, of Pontiac 2023 MQPL survey respondents felt they were not treated with respect by staff, compared to 61% responding to a similar question at Pontiac max in a 2019 JHA survey (and 55.3% of MSU respondents).

In JHA’s 2023 Pontiac MQPL survey responses, there were a few comments citing staff as one of the most positives things about life at the prison.

“Staff don’t just harass people unless inmates make them do their job staff have the attitude of you leave us alone we leave you alone.”
“I do feel safe around staff, and I think they care about us to a certain extent.”

In MQPL survey comments, almost a third of people responding cited staff as one of the most negative aspects of the prison. These comments identified issues such as lack of care, lack of professionalism, excessive force, inhumane treatment, dishonesty, lack of fairness, and a lack of accountability. At most prisons in which the modified MQPL has been administered in the United States, staff conduct is the most heavily cited negative factor in peoples’ lives.

**Discipline**

There were few comments made on discipline during the visit, but as noted above, RH units were not visited. One person in PC indicated that informal punishment was used saying that Saturday yard is taken away to “play with them,” sometimes after a fight. In 2023 survey responses 80% of people responded negatively to the statement “the disciplinary system is fair,” which was similar to 81.3% in JHA’s 2019 Pontiac max surveys. 83% of Pontiac 2023 respondents responded affirmatively to the statement “this prison is poor at giving incarcerated people reasons for decisions.”
In survey comments several people reported unfair, disproportionate, or unofficial disciplinary sanctions. As JHA commonly hears throughout IDOC, people continued to also express concerns regarding staff lack of objectivity or bias, retaliation, and being “threatened” with disciplinary tickets.

“C/O lie on you on tickets to be bias”

“The administrations write us tickets for minute things such as having empty soda bottles in our cell and then restrict us from using the phone. which is entirely disproportionate”

“It took 9-months to get my glasses, I can't see without my glasses, did staff help, no. I was threatened with a ticket if I kept asking.”

Publicly available IDOC data shows that the average length of stay in RH at Pontiac was still 119 days in November 2023, compared to 137 days a year prior. Data provided to JHA in August 2023 shows people identified as Seriously Mentally Ill (SMI) on average continue to stay longer in this status. In advance of the visit, JHA requested disciplinary data and information including the number of people with RH terms of more than 30 days, six months, a year, and longest stay, as well as information regarding numbers of individuals with lengthy terms of C-Grade privilege restrictions, which was not provided. In draft review, administrators noted Pontiac receives many individuals who were given lengthy disciplinary sanctions at their previous prison and that they conduct ongoing reviews and can cut terms. JHA will continue to seek and review data demonstrating changes to disciplinary practices.

Grievances

Administrators stated during the 2023 JHA visit that grievances were actively being used as a way of understanding issues at Pontiac. It was also stated Pontiac’s new medical director is applying lessons learned from grievances as a way of improving the quality of medical care.
Pontiac administrators provided some grievance data as requested by JHA in relation to the visit. This information appeared to log more than 2,800 grievances from 2022 and over 2,400 grievances year to date in November 2023. Although the information was not in a format that JHA was easily able to understand, it appeared that 38 grievances in 2023 (less than 2%) had been affirmed or received a “mixed” disposition, meaning partially finding in favor of the grievant, while 258 (about 11%) were denied and 626 (26%) were “moot.” 1,395 of the logged grievances in 2023 (58%) still had blank disposition fields. For 2022, it appears 48 grievances were marked affirmed or mixed (again less than 2%), 384 were denied (about 14%), 1,126 were found moot (40%), and 1,235 had blank disposition fields (44%). In response to draft review, IDOC provided the following clarification for inclusion in this report regarding the 2023 grievances on June 3, 2024, “of the 2,380 total grievances filed at Pontiac from 1-1-2023 to 11-15-2023, 978 grievances had been completed with final dispositions that can accurately be tracked and reported to JHA. Of these 978 completed grievances as of the date 11-15-2023: 13 were Affirmed (1% of reviewed and completed grievances), 30 had Mixed outcomes (3%), 270 were Denied (28%), and 665 were found to be Moot (68%).”
In survey comments people at Pontiac continued to note issues with grievances, e.g., “it took two years for my grievance to answered;” “my grievances go nowhere;” and “The grievance system is flawed. It is always designed for you to lose.”

During the visit, someone also stated that he still had “no faith in grievances.”

Another person wrote in a survey response they “can’t get any replies to anything without the threat of a grievance.” While this comment was a complaint on the quality of communication with incarcerated people, it also serves to demonstrate that the grievance system is potentially an effective tool.

Additionally, in survey comments an incarcerated person suggested that the grievance system required greater independence, as well as need for increased independent oversight, which JHA supports.

“The grievance process and procedure should be totally independent of correctional staff who are unionized. There should be a direct line to report staff misconduct and inhumane conditions.”

IDOC in 2024 is piloting changes to the grievance system at five prisons, not including Pontiac, and has hired statewide regional supervisory staff. JHA will continue to monitor these issues.
Someone sent privileged mail to JHA stating “I'm sending you my grievance because Pontiac is not sending my grievances back to me for process.” He wrote that he was trying to transfer in part due to living conditions and fear for his safety, stating that he had not come out of his cell for a year. “I need some help because Pontiac is bad the walls leaking, water mixed with feces, blood and dirt. I am not able to shower or nothing because the showers got mold everywhere.”

His grievance states, “The living conditions are inhumane in every housing unit the walls is dirty there’s feces on the walls, windows and floors. The water leaks from the roof in East house to the West house when it rains or when someone flood there cell by stopping up there toilet. Individual is around mentally ill individual who throw feces everyday and attempts suicide from being isolated in the cell 24 hours a day. Individuals are not given cleaning products such as bleach or disinfect to clean there cells and its unhealthy inume living conditions. Individual has wrote many grievance about these issues in Pontiac C.C. but nothing has changed it’s only gotten worse. … Individual is not taken showers because its mold on the walls in ceilings and feces around the bars in most of the showers in Pontiac C.C. Individual is almost free and its hard for him to prepare for the world because of all these issues around Pontiac C.C. The individuals are breaking the phones almost everyday at Pontiac C.C. so it’s hard to reach out for help to family and others. Individual does not want to talk to mental health because it is not confidential and they do not give us proper treatment at Pontiac C.C.”

Material Conditions

Food

Only 10% of incarcerated people reported they were satisfied with food from dietary in MQPL surveys, compared to 19% in 2019 JHA Pontiac maximum-security surveys.
Staff stated that the food at Pontiac was considered the best in the state within IDOC. In MQPL survey comments about the most positive things at Pontiac there were a few comments about food: “I love the food”, “decent food”, and “the food is good.”

However, there were at least 17 comments describing food as “bad,” “poor” or “horrible” in response to open-ended questions asking respondents to identify negatives at the prison. “Food” was the tenth most common word in negatives.

“The food here is horrible. Either over cooked or under cooked every day. No flavor. The menu that they show to Springfield sounds so good, but it is far from what they serve us.”

One incarcerated person said in a survey response that the food quality had recently gone down because it depends on the food supervisor, not the food coming in. They suggested a recent change in the position led to worse food.

“The quality of food has majorly decreased”

All incarcerated people were fed in their cells. The lack of use of communal dining areas further reduces the already inadequate amount of out-of-cell time.

**Lighting and Ventilation**

In the MSU population housing area within the max prison one person told JHA that there was a fluorescent light on 24 hours a day, and he got into trouble if he tried to block the light from coming into his cell. He also said that due to this light he was on mental health and sleeping medications, which he had never been on before. This comment highlighted one of the differences and difficulties experienced by lower security individuals housed in a high security setting. However, overall JHA heard far fewer conditions concerns from people formerly housed in the MSU than during our 2022 visit, likely reflecting administrative efforts to increase out-of-cell time and productive activity for this subset of the Pontiac population.
There were few comments that were raised regarding ventilation during the visit. In survey comments someone mentioned as a negative poor air quality and another raised the need for better air circulation.

“We need a ventilation system, Pontiac was built in the 1800's/inadequate windows, no air and the heat breaks down.”

Someone else mentioned in their survey response that the old “tunnel “system (the space behind a row of cells) negatively affected the air quality.

“On the surface they may be able to dress it up, but check the tunnels and see what we are forced to breathe.”

During the visit JHA representatives were able to observe part of the tunnel area behind the cells from an entrance point; however, JHA is not able to adequately assess the ventilation system and encourages this to be part of regular comprehensive professional safety and sanitation reviews.

**Sanitary Facilities**

During the visit there were few reports about issues with toilets within cells. There were multiple comments that toilets on the yards needed to be cleaned out. One person said that it was just a hole in the ground and that it had not been cleaned out in five years.

There were at least 21 comments citing plumbing concerns in survey responses to the question “what suggestions do you have for improvement?”

“Replace all of plumbing as well as the drinking wells, and toilets faucets showers etc. The tunnels behind the cells are condemned like dangerous mold, leaks, stagnant water elsewhere leaks in ceilings, condemned cells have mold as well as some cells.”
“Toilets sinks are leaking for I don’t know how long but Most of the water is felling To The back of Cell’s Tunnel That is building up some mold That stinking smell be coming out The cell’s vent.”

Two survey comments highlighted the positive of single showers instead of multi-person showers used in IDOC elsewhere. In all PC interviews, people reported showers were available three times a week for those who do not work, and five times a week for those who work. Showers are supposed to be available minimally three times a week in RH.

There were at least four negative survey comments on the maintenance of the showers.

“The showers don’t get cleaned regularly and the gallery hasn’t been mopped in a month and it’s nasty everywhere, especially in the shower”

One person interviewed and one who commented on a survey – both individuals with mobility issues – said that there should be better access to the showers. One, who used a walker, said it was hard for him to step into the shower. He reported he spoke to Equip for Equality (Illinois’ Protection & Advocacy organization charged with protecting the rights of people with disabilities in institutional settings) about this issue over the summer, but it remained a concern. The other individual commented “the cells aren’t ADA accessible for me. Nor the showers.” Unfortunately, this is a commonly reported and observed issue throughout IDOC, and one that becomes increasingly concerning given the aging population.

**Personal Hygiene**

In general, there were few concerns raised about the overall system for the distribution of hygiene items received during the visit or noted in survey comments. One survey comment focused on a lack of access to the laundry for some incarcerated people. Another person wrote:

“They totally disregard inmates in seg unless its an inmate that the staff favors. Other inmates in seg staff will totally walk by then when asking for help for something or if they need something like soap, or tissue, blankets, sheets”
Clothing and Bedding

In addition to the survey comment above, also noting inability to access bedding in RH/disciplinary segregation, issues raised to JHA around clothing and bedding were largely due to the poor quality of the state-issued items. In MQPL survey comments one person identified one of the most negative aspects of life in Pontiac as “Having to sleep on a steel frame called bunk without a real mattress.” Another said, “give us pillows, better mattresses.”

Accommodation

Administrators stated that with the amount of available space due to the lower population, when there were infrastructure issues with a particular cell it was possible to move people to other cells. However, in MQPL survey responses people cited issues with cells, including “mold,” “plumbing issues,” “cells dirty,” “a lot of cells leak due to the rainwater,” and “a lot of cells have cracks in the ceiling.” People noted need to fix leaks in cells and for “cleaner cells.”

The IDOC January 2024 Quarterly Report (which reflects November 2023 data) identified that only 25% of incarcerated people at Pontiac were housed in single cells. People commented in surveys regarding cell size at Pontiac, e.g., noting the need to “get wider cells” and that “The cells are too small for two people.” At other prisons, such as Lawrence and Menard, JHA often hears that a positive is the ability for people to be single-celled.

While it is understood that the cell sizes may be impossible to change, it stands to reason IDOC should take advantage of the reduced population and increase utilization of a greater number of the single cells. It is also clear that Pontiac, like other IDOC prisons, is not compliant with American Correctional Association standards for cell size, which further supports reducing double-celling.
Water Quality

In total, water concerns were mentioned 19 times in interviews when individuals in custody were asked if they had any physical plant concerns.

Water was the third most frequently mentioned word as a negative in open-ended responses, after “staff” and “cell.” Further, “conditions” was the second most commonly raised issue after “staff” in survey responses.

“Water is contaminated with a black substance”

“Unsafe drinking water”

“The quality of the water here is very very foul”

“How the water is contaminated and not bother doing anything about it.”

“The water is unfit for humans to drink”

“The water was black lead”

“Drinking dirty water most likely from old lead pipes”

On a housing unit gallery, when asked, staff indicated that they would not drink water from fountains.

The water quality at Pontiac has been a longstanding and well-documented issue, including an Illinois Environmental Protection Agency violation notice issued in February 2023. During the JHA visit administrators discussed steps taken to address water quality, and stated that they had put a memo out on tablets explaining what had been done. It should be noted not every person incarcerated in Pontiac has a tablet. A coalition of environmental advocates and prison reform groups continue to raise the issue of the need for safe and clean drinking water inside
Illinois’ prisons and have reached out to government agencies beyond IDOC to flag concerns and press for interventions. This effort is ongoing.

While administrators noted that the water comes from the city, incarcerated people suggested that it was not the quality of the water that arrived at the prison that was the issue, but that it was Pontiac’s old and decrepit piping. The CGL infrastructure report noted that among Pontiac’s capital needs is replacement of plumbing fixtures and faucets; as noted above the report put the cost of addressing all of the Pontiac’s deferred maintenance needs at $235 million.

As cited in the recommendations above, it is essential not only that IDOC addresses physical plant concerns, such as those relating to water quality, but also that all such actions are effectively communicated to the incarcerated population and staff.

In draft review administrators noted that the prison is on the city water system, but that they have been repairing fixtures (e.g., faucets and toilets) within the prison, and that about 75 had been completed. They stated this work is labor intensive and was occurring slowly and steadily. Further they said that this is important because it results in a better end product for the user and more usable cells within the prison. They reiterated that closing East House remained a priority.

Water Temperature Management

During interviews, when people were asked about physical plant concerns, four people said that there were frequent failures to provide hot water. One person said that there had been no hot water in the housing unit on a gallery for two years. In MQPL comments there were at least six comments identifying a lack of hot water in cells as one of the most negative things at Pontiac. Someone wrote JHA, “Without working hot water in our cells we’re in a degenerative environment which threatens the physical and mental well-being of us. Without working hot water in the cells this effects our personal hygiene, doing laundry, preparation of food in the
cells, cleaning to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. This widespread deprivation of hot water is a health crisis and violates our constitutional rights.” In May 2024, JHA received a letter recounting that someone and his cellmate had been “for six long months” in a cell without hot water, noting “there are others suffering here as well.”

Communications and Activities

Phone Calls

According to some incarcerated people interviewed in PC, they received 20 mins of phone time on the gallery every other night. In Pontiac (as in other older maximum-security prisons) there are no dayrooms, and phones on housing units are passed cell to cell while there are phones available on some yards when people have access. Some people interviewed reported phones were available between 6am and 10pm. Some incarcerated people suggested that permitting phone access from 5am-12am would be an improvement because workers might not get to use phones under the existing schedule. **JHA recommends Pontiac administrators look into this suggestion because it seems it would not add any significant staff burden and would promote well-being and contact with outside supports.** Additionally, people may not want to work due to missing phone time, and ensuring access may have an additional benefit of promoting engaging in productive activity potentially permitting eligible people to earn sentencing credit.

At least three of the 39 people interviewed during the visit when responding to questions regarding out-of-cell time identified the lack of the phones in the yard, together with the short amount of open-air access, as a cause of fights. This is commonly reported throughout IDOC.

While 44% of survey respondents responded affirmatively to questions on whether they were able maintain meaningful contact with outside supports, 81% did not believe that staff helped maintain these supports.
In survey comments people also expressed concerns, both with the lack of phone time as well as the problems with the system whereby phones are passed between cells and access can be controlled by other individuals in custody.

“They leave it up to the inmates to pass the phone cell to cell.”

“Not enough phones”

“Not enough usage of the phone. It’s not available.”

“Pontiac PC has a bunch of individuals who have been here for 20, 25, even 30 years. Who these officials cater to their every whim. They get to run and operate the inmate phones.”

For this reason, a few incarcerated people suggested that the system should be more heavily managed or monitored by staff. For example, a suggestion for improvement in MQPL open-ended comments was: “For correctional officers to make sure each inmate in each cell gets the chance to use the phone if the inmate chooses to.”

In Pontiac survey comments at least eight people recommended that phones should be available on tablets. This is commonly requested throughout IDOC, as JHA has previously reported, and depends on IDOC’s ability to obtain a contract with a tablet provider and improve
wiring/electronic infrastructure in antiquated prisons. This is also partially tied to budget appropriations, which have all been ongoing issues for several years that JHA continues to stress should be prioritized to improve community connectiveness and wellbeing in our prisons.

“We need phone on the tablets to stop phone fights, broken phones, and the passing of virus because 50 men use the same phone”

**Family Visits**

During the 2023 JHA monitoring visit, administrators confirmed that only the former MSU population has contact visits, for which Pontiac has built an open visitation room space in the maximum-security part of the prison with normal visitation features such as vending machines, which was a change since JHA’s 2022 visit. While administrators reported maximum-security including PC people may be able to have a brief “meet and greet” contact (e.g., a hug) at the beginning and end of a visit, the rest of the visits are conducted with a barrier between the individual in custody and visitor. As noted above, at the time of JHA’s 2023 visit more than half of the people now in Pontiac’s maximum-security housing were classified as medium or minimum-security (315); less than a third of these people were considered still part of the MSU (100). PC is only offered in IDOC in maximum-security prisons, so it is likely that many people in that status could otherwise be classified as lower security.

None of the other maximum-security prisons in IDOC require all visits to be non-contact; rather, non-contact visits are used only for disciplinary reasons. Lack of contact visits has been a longstanding concern unique to Pontiac. **JHA continues to assert that IDOC must make individual determinations regarding such restrictions and that are as limited as possible and only used for documented and appealable safety concerns.** The fact that contact visitation space was able to be created for the MSU population suggests physical plant is not the barrier.

During the JHA visit, three people in PC status raised non-contact visits being difficult for them and many people in MQPL comments described non-contact visits as one of the most negative aspects of being in Pontiac. The term “visit” appears as one of the top ten indicator words.
“For me, seeing my family is everything. But I can’t enjoy my visits with my family thru a glass window”

“The visits are behind glass for everyone & my family don’t feel it’s worth it & say it’ll make them sad which stops us growing.”

“Just because I was forced into PC I have to have bogus visits. My family will not even visit me now because of this”

Some incarcerated people noted that the discrepancy between medium and maximum-security visits felt like an additional punishment for those in protective custody.

**JHA recommends review of protective custody policy as many people remain overclassified and restricted based on safety concerns.**

Protective custody populations housed at other maximum-security prisons are not limited to non-contact visitation. However, Pontiac is more proximate to Chicago compared to Menard and Lawrence, which are located in the Southern part of the state approximately five hours away by car, and thus may have other visitation barriers for people’s support systems.

“Visitation with family is like restrictive housing, basically punishment for choosing protective custody despite security level.”

The number of comments – as well as the way in which people describe contact visits as fundamentally important – reinforces the importance of allowing contact visits for all incarcerated people at Pontiac, absent an individualized safety reason for this to be restricted for a limited period of time.

Housing people in higher security settings than necessary causes distress also for families, as someone wrote JHA: “My brother is living in inhumane conditions, he has complained about fear for his life from both staff and other inmates. He is also being held in maximum security housing, when he listed as medium security. He has also asked to be moved to another facility and has been denied repeatedly with no explanation as to why. He has stated that Pontiac is mentally and physically deteriorating him, and he is scared to come out of his cell.”
Academic and Rehabilitative Programs

During the visit some positive experiences with programs were identified. JHA representatives met with a group of incarcerated people in PC status during a class run by Defy Ventures. Some talked about the benefits of the program for their future outlook and employment. One said that the program was the best thing about Pontiac.

A concern expressed in survey comments was the lack of programs for those who have a high school diploma or GED. Figures within the IDOC Quarterly reports demonstrate the lack of educational opportunity at Pontiac:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Program</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Completers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sept Oct Nov</td>
<td>Sept Oct Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABE</td>
<td>4 6 5</td>
<td>3 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced ABE</td>
<td>16 16 14</td>
<td>1 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
<td>- - -</td>
<td>- - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASE</td>
<td>8 8 6</td>
<td>1 1 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College - 2 Year degree</td>
<td>- - -</td>
<td>- - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College - 4 Year degree</td>
<td>- - -</td>
<td>- - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title 1</td>
<td>- - -</td>
<td>- - -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Participants</strong></td>
<td><strong>28 30 25</strong></td>
<td><strong>5 3 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total as % of Population</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.6% 5.0% 4.1%</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.8% 0.5% 0.5%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average less than 5% of the population at Pontiac are participating in an educational program and less than 1% complete an educational program each month. There was no vocational training at Pontiac. Some people also mentioned the absence of substance use disorder treatment.

Someone who since paroled from Pontiac who had been incarcerated more than 20 years wrote of his desire to better prepare “for the world,” and that “I've requested and been approved for a Re-entry institution transfer. Yet here I still sit stuck in Pontiac GP awaiting the transfer for the
Another person wrote, “There is no type of rehabilitation programs in this facility for individuals in custody in Protective Custody. We are treated like we are in a disciplinary housing unit. Just because we are in Protective Custody.”

**IDOC should work to provide people at Pontiac with more engaged activity and greater ways for eligible people to earn program sentence credits.** Administrators stated in May 2024 that peer education had been expanded since the visit.

**Commissary**

Commissary staff explained that MSU is permitted to access commissary weekly, whereas maximum-security units have commissary twice a month. For each commissary run people in the MSU may shop up to a $150 limit, while the people in maximum-security are allowed up to $100. The disparity was noted as a negative in some survey comments:

> “Commissary is run unfairly (some people shop $600.00 Per month when I can only shop $200.00 per month”

One person noted during the visit that Pontiac is better than other maxes in terms of commissary. In MQPL comments at least 12 people identified commissary as one of the most positive things at Pontiac and something that works well.

In survey responses, at least seven people cited the commissary as a negative.

> “Our commissary used to be good before COVID, now it sucks, bunch of draconian limits, snack sized items only.”

Others complained about the prices in the commissary.

> “They charge us triple for commissary products the normal price”
> “Commissary is breaking the law with sick price hikes, sometimes double at once”

JHA compared some commissary prices from lists provided over time at Pontiac in the chart below. In nearly every case, price increases appeared to substantially outpace inflation, although end prices were comparable to prices in the community. However, importantly,
individuals in custody who are unassigned may earn as little as $13 state pay monthly (which may be further garnished) and we cannot be sure from the information available that the compared products are exact equivalents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>March 2019</th>
<th>April 2022</th>
<th>Nov 2023</th>
<th>Price Rise 2019-2023</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colgate Total toothpaste</td>
<td>$3.40</td>
<td>$3.30</td>
<td>$4.74</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA Battery 4-pack</td>
<td>$1.25</td>
<td>$0.79</td>
<td>$1.50</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack cracker</td>
<td>$1.95</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
<td>93.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey bun</td>
<td>$0.60</td>
<td>$0.81</td>
<td>$1.05</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatorade 20oz.</td>
<td>$1.48</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out-of-cell and outdoor access

“We are lockdown 24 hrs a day shower 3 days a week we get yard 2 times a week this has changed my mental health a lot do to being lockdown for this long.”

There were major reported disparities in outdoor access between the MSU population and other units at Pontiac. In the MSU housing area four of six people interviewed said that they were allowed out of their cells for around five hours a day, with typical times between 8-11am and then again 2-4pm. All of the six people interviewed said that their yard time was good. This indicates a significant improvement in outdoor access for the MSU population since JHA’s previous visit in May 2022. While it is positive that MSU individuals were being allowed increased outdoor access, housing MSU in a maximum-security area raises additional issues.

While out-of-cell time in MSU has positively increased, there was some inconsistent information on the suitability of the yard area used. One person stated that one side of the MSU housing recreates in the smaller yard, and the other in the big yard. The smaller yard recreation was reportedly “in cages,” as used for people in RH status, and less popular. However, when the
issue was raised in the debrief, the warden stated that no one in the medium-security housing area recreates in cages. It was not clear how this different understanding came about.

JHA attempted to obtain clarity regarding yard time offered to individuals based on housing unit or classification by reviewing yard schedules. However, the information provided lacked enough specificity to tell which populations were supposed to be provided recreation on which yard at what time. **JHA recommended that administrators review how yard time is being run and that out-of-cell time be increased, with expectations made clear.** In draft review, administrators stated that they are “constantly looking for new avenues” to increase out-of-cell time in light of lockdown and staffing shortage issues and that they had a “think-tank” meeting that day to see what could be done to increase services. While they were non-committal regarding establishing any set out-of-cell expectations, they stated they wanted “as much as possible” as it helps the facility run better. Administrators reported that they have a lot of staff (30-40) on the road for writs daily and that this is a challenge.

In the non-MSU units visited, out-of-cell time continued to be reported as less than two hours a day, which is insufficient. People commented to the effect that “You are pretty much locked down 24 hours a day unless you have a work assignment.” Several people in PC who were interviewed while in the Defy Ventures class said they have access to the program twice a week for a total of five hours, but some of this class time occurred during their housing area’s yard time, so that the class would be the only time that they would out of their cells.

Additionally, during the visit, people reported that there is also little access to the gym during programming time due to apparent disturbances caused by gym noise to programs. Access to the gym for recreation should be increased. If the noise of gym usage creates significant problems to programming, IDOC should find a method to mitigate this issue. This is especially important during colder months when outdoor recreation may be canceled for low temperatures.

In JHA 2023 [Pontiac MQPL survey data](#), 92% of respondents from Pontiac said that they were not out of their cells for at least two hours a day. 96% said that they believed they spent too long locked in cells. [Illinois law](#) states that prisons “shall provide facilities for every committed person to leave his cell for at least one hour each day unless the chief administrative officer determines that it would be harmful or dangerous to the security or safety of the institution.” All people in RH under [IDOC Agency Rules](#) are supposed to minimally receive 10 hours a week out-of-cell with
at least one hour out over five days. Many people in general population continued to report RH-like conditions.

In survey comments there were at least 15 instances of people citing short yard times as a negative. Again, this term was one of the top ten terms raised. Comments often expressed frustration with the frequency of yard time being cancelled without warning due to staff shortages, lockdowns or other unforeseen events. It is essential that yard time be substantially increased.

“We get 2 yards a week. But (1) usually get cancelled.”

“Less yard hours than every other prison in the state”

“Only getting 4hrs of yard a week until something affects or cancels it.”

“Yard is only Ran when cell house isn’t ”short of staff””

**Law Library**

Administrators explained that movement to the law library would continue to be restricted (as it had been since March 22, 2023 when a staff member was attacked) until currently underway renovations were completed. They stated individuals were still able to access the law library information via request slips and that the MSU had use of kiosks. However, typewriters were not available for everyone due to this closure. An individual in custody in MSU stated that they had been facing an issue due to the typewriter not being available, but that staff had been responsive and had brought a typewriter to his housing unit for him to access, and it remained on the living unit for continued use. In survey comments at least seven people highlighted the lack of access to the law library as one of the negatives at Pontiac.

“They never let us in the law library. If they do its NOT enough”

“No in person law library”

Further, someone wrote JHA requesting IDOC rules and other information stating, “*I am an INDIGENT individual in custody, on a mental health caseload classified as “SMI,” and am unable to request legal material from my housing facilities law library due to me being without funds in my inmate trust fund account.*”
In May 2024 draft review, administrators stated they were running the law library and, on days where they could not run it due to staffing, services were provided on units and that they had recently discussed possibly adding another law clerk. Simultaneously, JHA continued to hear from people reporting lack of access, e.g., in a letter received in May, “Here at Pontiac we never get to go to the Law Library to fight our criminal cases. We get Legal Review that consist of your property legal boxes and one set of outdated legal books on a shelf. We get this only if there is enough staff to run it, which is rarely.”

**Healthcare**

**General Medical**

The medical services at Pontiac are blended between state employee and contractor Wexford staff, e.g., there are registered nurses who are state employees. Administrators spoke highly of the new Pontiac Medical Director, and noted that he tracked grievances to understand the biggest problems faced in medical care. JHA met the doctor on the visit and was encouraged to hear that he was active in recruiting other needed new medical staff.

Administrators stated they were active and making progress in hiring new staff, including healthcare. However, they noted registered nurse positions are hard to recruit for. Pontiac was using temporary agency nurses to fill short-term vacancies, as at other IDOC prisons. Pontiac had not been able to recruit an eye doctor, but administrators stated such needs were served through use of outside local providers. There had been improvements to the healthcare unit entrance.

During the visit several medical concerns were reported. One incarcerated person reported surgical follow up was taking a long time and that no labs had been done. Encouragingly, he also said that the new doctor was more thorough than previous ones. Another person reported not getting healthcare for a specific medical issue, but that he had not tried lately due to past unsatisfactory experiences of just being offered Ibuprofen. In May 2024, JHA continued to hear that medications were delayed.

Additionally, some survey comments raised healthcare experiences as one of the most negative things at Pontiac, with “medical” appearing as one of the top ten words.
“They have a nurse practitioner acting as a medical doctor”

“It can take a month to be seen for a medical request sometimes.”

“Being seen by medical takes months.”

Mental Health

The designated maximum-security mental health housing at Pontiac includes a Residential Treatment Unit (RTU), Modified Therapeutic Community (MTC) housing, as well as a Behavioral Modification Unit (BMU). The BMU allows placement by a mental health team due to behavioral issues. Some individuals housed in mental health areas are on restrictive housing status.

About a third, 31%, of Pontiac survey respondents felt mental health treatment was not available, while 39% felt it was. In 2019 JHA surveys this was 45.2% and 26.5% respectively at Pontiac max.

In 2023 survey comments at least six people identified mental healthcare as a positive at Pontiac.

“Mental health actually try to help. But I can only speak on my experience”

At least 14 people identified mental health issues as a negative thing about Pontiac and this, like medical, was also an issue identified as one of the top ten terms used in negative responses.

“Mental Health staff bordering on "useless."”

“Mental Health pushes pills on to inmates but the counseling is almost none existent”

“Pontiac C.C. needs to house S.M.I. (serious mental Ill) inmates in a cellhouse by themselves to better control and treat them, because not all staff are equipped to deal with these S.M.I. inmates, but they are housed everywhere”

Dental

There were reportedly two dentists at Pontiac for a population of around 600. JHA commonly hears at other IDOC prisons that they have much more limited dental care coverage with much
larger populations. There were a few negative comments received in on dental care at Pontiac in surveys.

**Staffing**

As in most correctional facilities nationwide, there were significant shortages of staff reported. However, the significant decrease in population led administrators to describe the situation as relatively manageable. In October 2023 at Pontiac there were a total of 807 IDOC staff, 587 security and 223 non-security. The were also 90 non-IDOC staff.

Pontiac reported vacancies of 60% of the authorized nursing positions and 47% of the authorized correctional officer positions at the time of the visit. Administrators stated the authorizations were based on the current population. However, other IDOC administrators have stated that while **Pontiac staff authorizations have been adjusted to account for the MSU closure, they have not been further adjusted to reflect the reduced and changed population and housing unit closures within the max facility**. The ratio of staff 1.5-1 as reported in the October 2023 Quarterly Report is one of the highest in IDOC. Typically, such high staffing ratios will only be used for the highest need and security individuals, which may be inappropriate for the current changed Pontiac population and should be evaluated.

One way Pontiac administrators reported the prison coped with staff shortages is by utilizing fewer staff and lockdowns at night. They also reported they are strategic with filling posts and they close towers when they can. Between July and Dec 2023 Pontiac had 43 total lockdown days compared to 121 at Menard, and 2 at Stateville. In May 2024, JHA continued to get reports of frequent Pontiac lockdowns, and someone wrote **“Here at Pontiac we get one yard a week.”**

Administrators stated that they felt there had been a remarkable improvement to the atmosphere and culture at Pontiac. Initiatives that they stated helped with this included giving staff reasons for decisions that were made; including staff on committees to bring about change; utilizing multi-disciplinary committees to review decisions regarding individuals in custody; having staff shadow people in the same roles at other prisons and between different departments at Pontiac to help staff better understand staff functions; and staff wellness programs. All these methods have reportedly reduced staff turnover (which they stated was
much higher in prior years) and reduced the number of staff moving to other state agencies, such as the Illinois Department of Human Services. The administration was also reportedly taking greater efforts to measure staff coming to work, complaints, and turnover; paying attention to staff concerns, such as focusing on assignment issues and burnout; and providing more resources.

**Conclusion**

While significant challenges remain at Pontiac, there were a number of encouraging developments that may be grounded in efforts to improve institutional culture, as well as a result of a reduced and changed population. However, serious problems at Pontiac persist relating to out-of-cell time, possibly tied to reported longstanding staffing issues, and to antiquated infrastructure found not to meet institutional needs by independent consultants.
This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA’s Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (331) 264-4081 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.