COLLEGE INSIDE in collaboration with PRISONCAST!

Issue 2
March 2025

"Doing for Ourselves"

Art by Juan Hernandez

This newsletter began as an experiment.

After Open Campus and WBEZ Chicago's *Prisoncast!* began collaborating on coverage of higher education in prisons, we realized we could combine our efforts to better serve you directly with news and information relevant to folks incarcerated in Illinois.

When we sent out the first issue of this *College Inside x Prisoncast!* newsletter last fall, we got an overwhelmingly positive response. So we'll now be sending issues into Illinois prisons and jails every quarter, just before the statewide Prisoncast! broadcasts on Illinois Public Radio stations.

College Inside is a newsletter published by Open Campus that digs into the nexus of two major systems shaping our society: higher education and criminal justice. Our ongoing partnership with WBEZ's *Prisoncast!* Team lets us send you stories that you asked us to report on. We hope the newsletter will soon be available on your tablets, too.

We chose this image, "Doing for Ourselves," for our cover art because it captures how incarcerated people often step in to fill gaps in prison programming. The artist, Juan Hernandez, wanted to show "three cells that have answered a need in the community." He wrote that he depicted a jailhouse lawyer, an artist using art as a tool for rehabilitation, and a communal library to demonstrate how incarcerated people provide support to each other (for more about Hernandez, see pg. 3).

Our mission is to serve you, so let us know how we're doing. See pg. 8 for our contact info, and give us your feedback on the newsletter and on the *Prisoncast!* broadcast airing March 30 from 2-4 p.m. CT.

We hope you enjoy it.

– Charlotte West, Lauren Frost and Alex Keefe

Man wins year-long fight to be released from prison, but problems with sentence credits persist

By Charlotte West

Carl Rogers walked out of Robinson Correctional Center on Feb. 14. By his calculations, his release came more than a year later than it should have.

Rogers was released because of an Illinois law that went into effect last year giving sentence credits for work and education. The implementation has been beset by bureaucratic failures, and there are still incarcerated people who believe they would be immediately eligible for release if the Department of Corrections had properly calculated their credits.

A December 2023 internal report obtained by WBEZ shows the department was aware of record-keeping issues before the law went into effect. That report estimates it could take until 2029 to digitize all records necessary for proper credit calculations.

After WBEZ first reported on his case, Rogers staged a hunger strike to try and force prison officials to review his case. He was finally released after spending almost 32 years behind bars.

Two other men also resorted to hunger strikes after failing to make progress through the administrative grievance process. Those two men have been granted work release, but remain incarcerated. Another man, Richard McConnell, was released last April after he was featured by WBEZ.

Angela Bowers, incarcerated since 1995, has a similar story. She earned a bachelor's degree from Lewis University in 1999 and worked in correctional industries as a warehouse clerk.

Bowers wrote to WBEZ that she has not received sufficient credit for work and programming prior to 2010, when the department implemented a digital recordkeeping

After 32 years in Illinois prisons, Carl Rogers came home more than a year after WBEZ first reported on his story. Photo courtesy of Carl Rogers.

system. A counseling summary she provided reveals IDOC is only giving half-day credit for correctional industries jobs prior to 2018. That decision means the agency is not interpreting the law as retroactive, which could mean years of difference in release dates for long-serving people. It also contradicts how the bill sponsor told WBEZ the law was supposed to work.

An IDOC spokeswoman said the department is awarding credit to any woman at the Lincoln prison who has documentation of work.

The December 2023 report acknowledged that an individual incarcerated for 20 years "may have 12 to 15 master file volumes …requiring dedicated banker boxes for transport when transferring facilities."

The report also concluded that IDOC lacks a "uniform, electronic records management system" and the estimated cost for digitization was approximately $250 million.

These findings confirm what WBEZ found: many records being used only go back to 2010. But most people like Rogers and Bowers who are eligible have been incarcerated since the 1990s.

As of January 6, 2025, approximately 2,019 individuals have had their sentencing credits reviewed. Of those, 1,213 remain in custody and 806 have been released. Records show 47 women have been reviewed and 28 released under the new law.

In November 2024, a judge cleared the way for a broader lawsuit challenging IDOC's calculations. The lawsuit alleges IDOC has "instituted a policy of prohibiting the retroactive award of credit for programs completed prior to 2010."

The state tried to have the lawsuit dismissed, arguing credit awards are discretionary, not mandatory. In a new filing, attorneys for incarcerated people said the law is "rife with explicit, non-discretionary sentence credit requirements."

Alan Mills, an attorney at Uptown People's Law Center, said if successful, the case should benefit everyone eligible for credit.

A spokesperson for the Department of Corrections did not comment, citing pending litigation.

Rogers is happy to be home, but continues to think about the men and women who are still fighting to get the sentence reductions they believe they have earned.

"Just adhere to the law – it's not complicated. It says, 'give them full sentence credit,'" Rogers said.

Charlotte West covers higher education for Open Campus. This story was originally published March 12, 2025.

A recently freed man shares how he fought his wrongful conviction

By Lauren Frost

Robert Johnson was 16 when Chicago police arrested him on charges of murder, armed robbery, and home invasion in 1996. He received an 80-year sentence, and served decades in prison. But through it all, he maintained he was innocent.

Then, in 2020, journalists with the Invisible Institute published an investigation into Johnson's case, featuring a "mountain of new evidence" pointing to his innocence. This Feb., a judge threw out Johnson's conviction, and he walked free. There are dozens of people with stories similar to Johnson's in Illinois, which in recent years has been the wrongful conviction capital of America.

Less than a week after his release, Johnson and investigative journalist Alison Flowers spoke with WBEZ about what it takes to clear your name. This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

What kind of evidence to look for

Flowers: The way you need to think about what's going to move your case forward is: what is new? And what the court considers new [evidence] is what was not available at the time of your original trial, and what would have made a difference in your case.

So that might be a witness who didn't come forward. That could be a witness who recants and takes their testimony back and says, "I was lying because the police or the prosecutors forced me to say this." It could be physical evidence. You could look at the confession, and was it credible or not, and what were the circumstances for that confession. [You should also note] what police officers were involved, which really matters a lot here in Chicago, where so many of our wrongful convictions are driven by police abuse.

How to work on your case inside

Johnson: I would suggest getting to that law library, and start trying to learn the law, and trying to work on your own case and get all the information that you can. And try to get under some people that have been there for some years, that know the law. This older brother helped me out. He kind of took me under his wing and taught me. And he helped me to file my post-conviction [relief petition].

Where to seek help on the outside

Flowers: The first is that advocate or helper on the outside to sort of facilitate the process, contact people on your behalf. [Second,] a journalist or the media – whether it's the media covering your story and what happened, or potentially even an investigative journalist, like myself, looking into your case and trying to find that new evidence on your behalf. And then the third piece is really a lawyer. A lawyer's office can also investigate your case. Sometimes they have the resources to do that, and other times they're just the correct entity to present that evidence in court.

Advice for the innocent

Johnson: I don't care how many times you get denied. I don't care how many appeals you have to keep on filing. Keep on fighting. If you are truly innocent, keep on fighting and never give up and keep on believing. I don't care how many no's you get – one day you will get a yes.

Hear the longer interview with host Erin Allen on *Prisoncast!*, Sunday, March 30 at 2 p.m. Central on Illinois Public Radio stations statewide *(see pg. 10)***.**

About the cover artist

Juan Hernandez is an incarcerated artist born and raised in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. His art has been exhibited at Angelica Kauffman Gallery, Art in Odd Places NYC, and The Design Museum of Chicago, amongst others. His writing has appeared in publications such as Prison Journalism Project and Teen Vogue, and he has received support from The Puffin Foundation and The National Association of Latino Arts and Culture. His work was recently shown at the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison's Expressive Arts Plenary during its inaugural Incarcerated Scholars Conference. He can be followed on Instagram at @jch_convictedart.

Illinois weighs restoring state financial aid to students in prison

Teaching Fellow Alex Negron leads a class at Sheridan Correctional Center on Feb. 11. Legislation in the Illinois statehouse could open state financial aid up to college students in prison. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus

By Lisa Kurian Philip

Jose Viadurri was serving more than 20 years in prison when he got serious about his education. He got his GED while incarcerated – it was the first time he remembers his mom being proud of him. Then he became the first person in his family to go to college.

"When I was told, 'You have the opportunity to attend a university,' while I was sitting in prison: that was a big form of acknowledging my humanity," Viadurri said.

Viadurri got out of prison late last year. He has struggled to find employment and support himself. He said he understands why people fall into old patterns, commit new crimes and end up returning to prison.

But, because the education he started in prison changed the way he sees himself, he said, "That's not an option for me."

Research shows higher education is one of the most effective ways to prevent recidivism. Yet just 615 out of 29,470 incarcerated people in Illinois are enrolled in college classes, according to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Only seven of the state's prisons offer any higher education programming.

But House Bill 2466, reintroduced in the General Assembly this session, could expand access by restoring state financial aid for incarcerated students.

Illinois once offered some form of higher education in every prison. But in 1987, state lawmakers barred incarcerated students from receiving state financial aid for college, including the MAP grant for low-income students. Shortly after, Congress took away federal financial aid.

Since then, colleges have had to rely mostly on private funding to operate programs in prisons, which can be expensive.

The Bard Prison Initiative estimates that awarding MAP grants to incarcerated students will cost just .01% of the program's budget – and save Illinois taxpayers much more if expanded access to higher education prevents people from getting locked up again.

"This is actually an investment in public safety," said Jessica Neptune with the BPI, which helped pass similar legislation in New York

But the legislation has its doubters.

Delrice Adams, director of the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, said she's heard from skeptics who ask, "Why would we put so much into this population [when] there are so many other folks that are in poverty ... that really need the support?"

But Adams insists, it's not an either-or situation. She said giving people in prison access to MAP grants could change the trajectories of families.

"These are members of our communities who are coming home, whether we like it or not, and to give them that level of hope, but also restoration – I just think it's the most humane thing to do for every individual," Adams said.

Meanwhile, Viadurri said he's working on finishing the bachelor's degree he started in prison.

"We shouldn't look at it as just, 'Oh, you're in prison and you can get a piece of paper and a degree," Viadurri said. "No, these things change people's lives. It changes the way they look at themselves. It changes the decisions that they make. And these are the same people who are going to come back into these communities."

Lisa Kurian Philip covers higher education for WBEZ and Open Campus. This story originally published Feb. 17, 2025. The MAP bill is now H.B. 2466.

Full repeal of Illinois' 'truth-in-sentencing' law is likely dead this session, sponsor says

By Alex Keefe

A bill to repeal Illinois' so-called "truth-in-sentencing" law is not likely to get a vote in the General Assembly this legislative session, the bill's chief co-sponsor told WBEZ.

State Rep. Barbara Hernandez, D-Aurora, said she was told by legislative leaders that her bill, H.B. 2367, would not be assigned to a committee during the session that adjourns at the end of May.

"[It's] not what we hoped for, but we will keep working on it during the summer," she said March 18th.

Hernandez's proposal, House Bill 2367 (formerly H.B. 5219), is a complete repeal of the truth-in-sentencing law. A competing bill – H.B. 3449 – would reduce sentences imposed under the law, but would not completely repeal it.

Truth-in-sentencing laws are a big reason many people in prisons nationwide are serving long sentences. Illinois' law, which took effect in 1998, makes people convicted of certain crimes serve at least 75% of their sentences before being eligible for release. Before that, they often got released after serving half their sentences.

Sponsored by State Rep. Justin Slaughter, D-Chicago, H.B. 3449 would chip away at the state's truth-in-sentencing statute. It would reduce the portion of a sentence that's required to be served by 25 percentage points. For example, someone currently required to serve 100% of their sentence would only have to serve 75%, and someone now serving 85% would have their time recalculated to 60%.

The full repeal bill is apparently stuck in the Rules Committee, colloquially known among Springfield politicos as the place "where legislation goes to die." H.B. 3449, meanwhile, has been assigned to the Judiciary-Criminal Committee, which Slaughter himself chairs. He did not respond to multiple interview requests from WBEZ.

Former Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar, a Republican, signs truth-in-sentencing legislation into law at an August 1995 press conference in downtown Chicago. Photo courtesy: Chicago Sun-Times

Still, advocates working on both bills are urging patience.

"It's too early to know, and we're gonna do everything we can, but we gotta recognize that changing our sentencing structure is gonna take a lot of hard work, effort, education – and, likely, time," said Lindsey Hammond, policy director with the non-profit group Restore Justice.

Despite Democratic supermajorities in Springfield, many representatives and senators are still hesitant to vote on big criminal justice bills after getting criticized for passing the 2021 SAFE-T Act that eliminated cash bail, lawmakers and advocates tell WBEZ. Those concerns about appearing "soft on crime" could complicate efforts to repeal – or even just scale back – the state's truth-in-sentencing law.

"Timing is a huge part of this," said Shaneva McReynolds, president of the advocacy group Families Against Mandatory Minimums, or FAMM.

Regardless, both Hammond and McReynolds said their groups continue to push for a full repeal, and that letters from incarcerated Illinoisans and their families have brought the issue to the forefront of lawmakers' minds.

"If it means we start at the [narrower bill], then come back for the full repeal...we're gonna continue to educate the legislature on why [a full repeal] is necessary," McReynolds said.

Alex Keefe is the editor of Prisoncast!. *This story has been updated since it was originally published March 5, 2025.*

Here's what our readers had to say...

What does "rehabilitation" mean to you?

"I've learned that rehabilitation is achieved once a person turns the focus of their response outward[.] Education must increase the quality of life instead of allowing punishment and shame to create defiance."

Francisco, Sheridan C.C.

"Make no mistake about it: Being locked away in these cells all day, every day isn't rehab."

Daniel, Menard C.C.

"*'Rehabilitated'* to me is a loaded word... *'Transformation'* is what should be discussed. Transformation shows that a person no longer holds onto the values that led to his/her incarceration."

Alex, Sheridan C.C.

"To me rehabilitation = gratitude. ... You don't realize what this really means until your freedom to be a part of it is taken away. I have been grateful for rain falling on my forehead and grass between my bare toes. Rehabilitation teaches you and then guides you to rediscovering this thing called Life."

Carrie, Logan C.C.

"Rehabilitation is for the guilty, not the innocent."

V., Pontiac C.C.

"According to the [Illinois] constitution, rehabilitation has to [do] with restoring an offender back to useful citizenship. But what does that really even mean? Let's say we settle on a definition as well as a criterion for rehabilitation. Are we confident that I.D.O.C. has the capability to implement the necessary curriculum?"

R., Shawnee C.C.

What is this newsletter?

Launched in 2021, College Inside digs into the nexus of two major systems shaping our society: higher education and criminal justice. This newsletter, published by Open Campus, sheds light on the most-pressing challenges facing incarcerated students during and after incarceration.

Our ongoing partnership with WBEZ Chicago, including collaboration with the Prisoncast! *team, has produced in-depth coverage of education in Illinois prisons, serving as a model for how local reporting can reveal both systemic challenges and efforts to overcome them.* Prisoncast! *is produced jointly by WBEZ and The Marshall Project.*

Illinois settles two lawsuits linked to prison education programs

By Charlotte West

The Illinois Department of Corrections has settled two federal civil rights lawsuits filed by people in prison who say their First Amendment rights were violated, according to documents obtained in a public records request filed by WBEZ and Open Campus.

The corrections department agreed to pay $5,000 to a peer educator fired for teaching about racist Jim Crow literacy tests. In the other settlement, the state will pay $90,000 to five men who say officials retaliated against them for debating parole reform in front of state legislators.

Margo Schlanger, a law professor at the University of Michigan, noted that such lawsuits can drive systemic change by forcing prison officials to examine their practices.

For Anthony McNeal, the settlement resolves a conflict that started in March 2023. At the time, McNeal was teaching a state-mandated civics course at Centralia Correctional Center when a prison counselor interrupted his lesson about Jim Crow literacy tests.

According to the lawsuit, counselor Nathan Tucker demanded McNeal present literacy tests "as having a legitimate nondiscriminatory purpose." When McNeal explained that teaching about racist voter suppression was part of the approved curriculum, Tucker filed a disciplinary report, charging McNeal with insolence, disobeying a direct order and bringing unauthorized teaching materials to class.

The lawsuit alleged IDOC violated McNeal's First Amendment rights through retaliation. Under the settlement reached in March 2024, IDOC agreed to pay McNeal $5,000, reinstate him as a peer educator and expunge the disciplinary report from his record.

The other settlement arose from a debate program at the now-closed Stateville prison.

Five men – Lester Dobbey, Joseph Dole, Raul Dorado, Bernard McKinley and Eugene Ross – sued former IDOC Director John Baldwin, Assistant Director Gladyse Taylor and other officials in federal court. According to their complaint, in March 2018, the program held a public debate on implementing parole in Illinois. The event drew state lawmakers, along with journalists, IDOC officials and members of the Illinois Prisoner Review Board, which oversees clemency and parole.

Two weeks later, Taylor made an unannounced appearance at a regularly scheduled debate class. Their lawsuit alleged she told participants she did not approve of their communications with legislators, stating it was "getting in the way of IDOC's pursuit of its own legislative agenda." The department then canceled the debate program and retaliated against participants, according to the original complaint.

Under the settlement agreement reached in early 2024, IDOC agreed to pay $90,000: $10,000 to each of the five plaintiffs and $40,000 in attorneys' fees.

Both cases were settled without IDOC admitting any liability. An IDOC spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment.

One of the debate students, Benard McKinley – who was released in 2024 after taking the LSAT in prison – is now a law student at Northwestern University.

This story was originally published on Jan 30, 2025.

Calling all MAGIC The Gathering® players!

A few of you have told us you play Magic: The Gathering inside your facility. We want to hear about it! Tell us how you got started playing, what the game means to you, what your playing group is like, and whether you have any questions for an MTG expert (or if you are an MTG wizard and want to share your advice on playing inside).

Write to us!

***Prisoncast!* c/o WBEZ**
848 E. Grand Ave.,
Chicago, IL, 60611-3509

COLLEGE INSIDE ONLINE!

Have your friends and family sign up for the email version of College Inside to stay up-to-date on the latest news about higher ed in prison in Illinois and across the country. Go to **www.opencampus.org/college-inside**!

About WBEZ's *Prisoncast!* project

What is *Prisoncast!*?

Prisoncast! is an audio and journalism project organized by WBEZ in Chicago and Illinois Public Radio stations to serve people inside Illinois prisons and their loved ones outside. Our goal is to create a show families can experience together, simultaneously, even when you're apart.

We also produce journalism and interview segments that provide practical, actionable information and accurate news based on what you tell our journalists. Everything on our show stems from a question, request or idea from people incarcerated, their LOs, or groups working inside. We strive to do this show *with* you and *for* you.

How do I submit requests for the show?

Submissions for our March 30 episode are now closed. But we'll be mailing surveys out soon for our June 15 Father's Day/Mother's Day episode! You can always reach us at the following address:

Prisoncast! c/o WBEZ,
848 E. Grand Ave., Chicago, IL, 60611-3509

We will also add you on tablet messaging if you request it! We strive to respond to all letters and messages, but it may take us up to 6-8 weeks due to the high volume we receive. People with internet access can fill out surveys electronically at **www.wbez.org/prisoncast**. People outside can make requests and record a voicemail dedication at **312-893-2931**, or send a voice memo or email to **prisoncast@wbez.org**.

Are you playing all requests on the radio?

No. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we likely will not be able to air all the requests we receive during the two-hour broadcast.

Will I know ahead of time if my request will be aired during the broadcast?

We can't guarantee that you will. We will try to notify as many people before the broadcast as possible.

How and when can I listen?

You can listen on an old-school radio or tablet FM radio app (find your local station below). We know some locations get spotty or no radio reception. If that's the case, please tell us and we'll work to reach you another way!

Where to find *Prisoncast!* on the radio

WSIU, 91.9FM, 90.3FM, 88.9FM
WILL, 90.9FM + 580AM
WUIS, 91.9FM, 89.3FM
WVIK, 90.3FM

WBEZ 91.5FM, 91.1FM, 90.7FM
WGLT, 89.1FM
WNIJ, 89.5FM, 89.1FM, 90.5FM, 91.3FM
WCBU, 89.9FM
WIUM, 91.3FM, 89.5FM, 90.7FM

Facility	IPR station	Facility	IPR station
Big Muddy River	WSIU	Menard	WSIU
Centralia	WSIU	Murphysboro	WSIU
Danville	WILL	Pinckneyville	WSIU + WILL
Decatur	WUIS + WILL + WGLT	Pontiac	WILL + WCBU + WGLT + WBEZ + WNIJ
Dixon	WNIJ + WVIK	Robinson	WSIU
East Moline	WVIK	Shawnee	WSIU
Graham	WUIS + WILL	Sheridan	WNIJ + WBEZ
Hill	WCBU + WIUM	Southwestern	WILL
Illinois River	WCBU + WGLT + WUIS + WIUM	Stateville	WBEZ
Jacksonville	WUIS + WILL + WIUM	Taylorville	WUIS + WILL
Kewanee	WVIK + WIUM + WCBU	Vandalia	WUIS + WSIU
Lawrence	WSIU	Vienna	WSIU
Lincoln	WUIS + WILL + WCBU + WGLT	Western Illinois	WUIS + WIUM
Logan	WUIS + WILL + WCBU + WGLT		

Don't miss the next
PRISONCAST!
show!
Airs Sunday, March 30, 2 p.m. Central Time