COLLEGE INSIDE in collaboration with PRISONCAST!

Issue 3
Sept. 2025

Sister Helen Prejean visits Cook County Jail

Famed anti-death penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean speaks to women incarcerated at the Cook County Jail. The women were participating in a book club with students from DePaul University focused on Sister Helen's book Dead Man Walking. The author happened to be celebrating her 86th birthday during her visit to the jail. She and students discussed the trappings of a good story, specifically character development.

"That unfolding you're talking about ... [is] probably one of the most exciting things in life -- to see that there's a different side to people," Prejean told the students. "In the rhetoric you hear sometimes around the death penalty ... [people want] to essentialize a person or crystallize them into this essence of evil, and you can never do that with human beings. ... Human beings can always change."

Cover photo by Lisa Kurian Philip/ WBEZ.

From the Editors

Nearly four years ago, Brian Beals was in his cell inside Dixon Correctional Center when he read a newspaper editorial that issued a challenge: Chicago needed to listen to new voices about how to solve its crime problems. So he turned to a fellow incarcerated writer, Toussaint Daniels, to write a play on the topic called "The Story of Violence," which ended up winning a PEN America national award. Beals and Daniels are out now, and are working with other formerly incarcerated people as part of their Mud Theater Project in Chicago. You can hear the play when it makes its radio debut this Nov. 6th on a special Prisoncast!, from WBEZ and Illinois Public Radio.

This is one of the many ways that Open Campus and Prisoncast! have teamed up to serve people inside Illinois prisons and their loved ones with news and information we make with you and for you. Every letter and message you send us makes this project stronger (even if it takes us a while to reply!). One reader, Daniel, wrote that he is able to access another newsletter about prisons on his tablet that only publishes "feel good stories." He acknowledged the importance of highlighting the positive, but also pointed out "there's so much negative here that we also need a platform to educate others about [the] truth."

That's the balance we aim to strike in this newsletter. Charlotte West wrote about an interstate transfer that allowed an incarcerated man to attend law school in Minnesota, while Lauren Frost reported on the years of substandard care that preceded IDOC's switch to a new health care provider. We're also including a round-up of other news bites that impact Illinois' criminal justice system.

We invite your feedback and criticism on how we can do our jobs better. We're happy to share with you that this newsletter and our previous Prisoncast! broadcasts will soon be available on Edovo, an app on the new tablets. (The archives of the national version of College Inside are already there!) Find how to write to us — and how to listen to Prisoncast! — at the end of this newsletter.

— Lauren Frost, Alex Keefe, and Charlotte West

How one Illinois man is studying to be a lawyer — from inside a Minnesota prison

By Charlotte West

For most incarcerated students, a transfer between prisons means disrupted education and even abandoned degrees.

But for Ronald Palm, a transfer from the Illinois Department of Corrections to Minnesota meant just the opposite: an unprecedented opportunity to attend law school while he was still locked up.

Palm, who was sentenced to 30 years at the age of 17, now attends Mitchell Hamline School of Law remotely from a prison in Faribault, Minnesota, about an hour south of Minneapolis. He is among a small group of incarcerated scholars pursuing law degrees at Mitchell Hamline, which says it's the first law school in the country to allow students to study from prison.

Palm started his college education at Danville Correctional Center, through the Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He graduated from Eastern Illinois University in 2023 before his transfer to Minnesota last summer to join the Prison to Law Pipeline initiative launched by Minneapolis-based nonprofit law firm The Legal Revolution.

Palm found out about the program after he contacted the national organization that administers the LSAT about taking the exam while he was still in prison. He didn't know about the Legal Revolution — or the possibility of actually attending law school while still incarcerated — until someone at the council forwarded his letter to the organization, he told WBEZ.

The Legal Revolution sent him study materials, he said, but the hardest part of the process was studying for the LSAT in the chaotic prison environment. He sought refuge by studying in the Education Justice Project's library at Danville. The program with Mitchell Hamline began in 2022

Ronald Palm, who grew up in Chicago, transferred from an Illinois prison to a one in Minnesota to move so he could attend the Mitchell Hamline School of Law remotely while he's incarcerated there. Photo provided by Ronald Palm

when the American Bar Association granted the law school permission to allow students to attend classes virtually. Besides Palm, two incarcerated students from Minnesota are enrolled in the program. Palm is now in his second semester. He has a tablet that allows him to conduct legal research and to email professors with questions, and he studies via Zoom in real time alongside law students who are on campus in Minneapolis. "It is like I have a seat in class, only I'm on the screen," he said.

The Legal Revolution covers his tuition, with Mitchell Hamline also providing a scholarship, Palm said. In recent years, a handful of formerly incarcerated people have started law school in Illinois. Last year, Benard McKinley became the first person in the state to take the LSAT from prison. A graduate of the Northwestern Prison Education Program, he's now a first-year law student at the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law.

Palm, who has served 22 years of his sentence, could be eligible for work release in about five years. At that point, he may be able to take the bar exam, although some states prevent people with criminal histories from becoming attorneys.

In Illinois, people with felony convictions are allowed to take the bar exam, but must first be certified as having "good moral character and fitness to practice law" by a special committee, according to the Illinois Board of Admissions to the Bar. It's unclear if someone would be allowed to take the bar exam while still in custody.

But Palm remains optimistic about the impact that attorneys who've been in prison themselves can have on the legal profession.

"I think we can have a tremendous effect on reforming the justice system," he said. "A lot of the time, we are portrayed as people who are just beyond redemption. But the truth is that some of us just [weren't] given the chance to excel."

This story was originally published on April 21, 2025.

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.*

What it's like to graduate from college while inside an Illinois prison

By Lauren Frost

In many ways, it looked like any college graduation. There were balloons, flowers and squares of frosted marble cake. Rows of family and friends faced a lectern in the fluorescent-lit gymnasium.

But the uniformed guards patrolling the gym underscored that this was no ordinary commencement. It was the first of its kind to take place inside the East Moline Correctional Center, a minimum-security men's prison on the Illinois-Iowa border about two and a half hours west of Chicago.

As the procession music played from a tabletop speaker, three students in caps and gowns marched up the aisle on Tuesday to become the first graduates of Augustana College to earn their bachelor's degrees while serving prison sentences.

"This moment is causing a lot of mixed emotions," said one incarcerated student, Brandon Johnson, addressing the room. "They say there's no crying in prison, but I brought some tissue just in case."

The Augustana Prison Education Program, or APEP, began full-time in the fall of 2021 and gained accreditation the following spring. It now has about 30 people enrolled. Students take college courses on everything from physics to poetry — but without access to the Internet and sometimes writing assignments by hand.

"It's the same Augustana degree requirements, same professors, same rigor — in a prison," said Sharon Varallo, the program's executive director.

The first to graduate, David Staples, finished his degree on-campus last year after his release from prison in 2022. Now, he has been joined by four more graduates, including the three present at Tuesday's ceremony: Jorge Herrejon, Brandon Johnson and Chris Allen.

Brandon Johnson got his bachelor's degree from Augustana College while incarcerated. "There is tremendous talent and intelligence behind these walls," he said. Photo: Lauren Frost / WBEZ

"I'm so proud of him. He's taken a bad situation and made the best of it," said Jim Allen, Chris Allen's father.

He said he drove three hours from central Illinois the previous night to see his son, who was locked up as a teenager, graduate from college.

There is high demand for educational programs in prison but very few opportunities. Incarcerated students describe their time in the classroom as transformative, and it helps many earn time off their sentences. But only about 600 of the more than 29,000 people in Illinois prisons are enrolled in higher education programs, according to the Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Steven Cardenas, a first-year student locked up at East Moline, said it took three tries before he was accepted into APEP.

"It's an opportunity that's not given in a lot of different facilities and one that I jumped at immediately because it's like I get to do something positive with my time," he said.

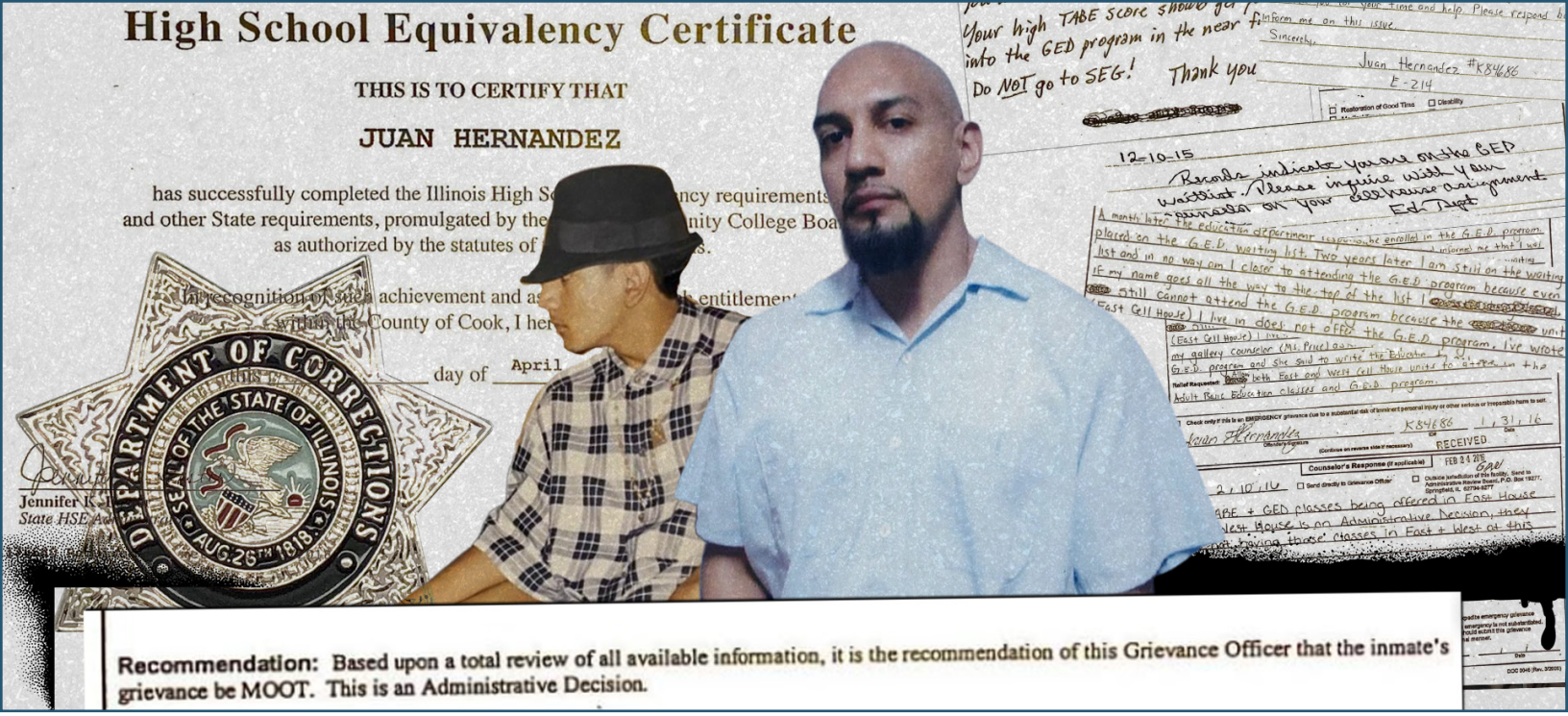
Herrejon said he enrolled in college not just for himself but primarily to set an example for his younger siblings. His little brother attended the ceremony.

"I had to change, and they had to see that," Herrejon said. "And I am proud to say that none of them have followed in the footsteps that I walked before I was incarcerated."

Herrejon said he's not sure what he'll do with his degree once he's released. He is 31 and has been incarcerated since he was 17.

"I do know that I wanted to be in service of people who are underprivileged, underrepresented...and teach them that there are options in life," he said.

This story was originally published on June 8, 2025.



Documents provided by Juan Hernandez. Photo illustration by Emily Jenkins.

A look inside the dreaded prison education waitlist

By Charlotte West

Juan Hernandez was a teenager when he was sentenced to prison. He was 32 when he finally completed his high school education.

The nearly two decades in between tell a story of bureaucratic barriers, arbitrary rules, and one man's refusal to give up earning his education.

It's not unusual for people locked up in the Illinois Department of Corrections to wait years to get into programming, such as GED or college classes. That's especially true for people serving long sentences for serious crimes, as the state prioritizes enrollment for people who will be released from prison sooner. Hernandez was sentenced to 45 years as a teenager.

But what makes Hernandez's story unique is the paper trail he kept throughout his fight — the letters he wrote to prison officials asking for access to education, and the responses he received. The documents, which he asked a friend to post on Instagram, offer a rare window into the often-opaque process of prison education waitlists that keep thousands of incarcerated people from accessing education inside.

"I realized education might be a way forward when the administration was adamant in keeping it from me," Hernandez wrote to WBEZ from Dixon Correctional Center, where he's currently locked up. At one prison, Juan wrote that he was assigned to a cell house with 1,000 other men — all of whom were barred from education simply because of where they lived.

Officials called the policy only to allow certain units access to classes "an administrative decision" with no further explanation. When he filed a formal prisoner complaint with IDOC — known as a grievance — a prison officer found his complaint "moot."

When letters and grievances failed to get him access to education, Hernandez escalated to a hunger strike — one of the drastic steps some incarcerated people turn to when other avenues are exhausted. That ended with prison staff attempting to force-feed him, he wrote. He was eventually transferred to a different prison, where the education administrator told him his test scores helped his case — but his release date did not.

The administrator also warned him: "Do NOT go to SEG!" — shorthand for administrative segregation, otherwise known as "the hole," which is similar to solitary confinement used as punishment for people in prison who get into trouble. Months later, Hernandez was finally enrolled in GED classes and, true to a promise he made in one of his letters, passed the test on his first attempt.

It's been seven years since then. Hernandez is still waiting to get into college.

In a statement, an Illinois Department of Corrections spokeswoman said increased educational staffing since 2018 has allowed more people in prison to complete the GED program, and that wait times have "decreased significantly." The average wait time to get into GED classes is less than three months, she said.

This story was originally published on June 19, 2025.

PJP STILLWATER AWARD WINNER

In May, Hernandez won a first place Best Illustration award for his work titled "Doing for Ourselves," which was featured on the cover of our previous issue. The Stillwater Awards are an annual competition recognizing excellence in prison journalism.

For every person in an Illinois prison college class, another waits their turn.

By Charlotte West

For every person enrolled in higher education at Illinois prisons, someone else is waiting for their turn, according to new state data that reveals a system where access to college depends largely on where someone is incarcerated.

Right now, roughly 2,000 people in Illinois prisons are participating in higher education programs, according to a report released at the beginning of September. That's about 1 out of every 15 people incarcerated in the state. At the same time, though, another 2,000 are stuck on waiting lists to get into classes because there's not enough programming available.

Another 700 people on supervised release — Illinois' version of parole — are also enrolled in higher education, per the report. Those numbers include enrollment in both college classes, and career and technical education.

People in Illinois prisons have been on waiting lists an average of 1.3 years, according to an analysis by Open Campus. Rebecca Ginsburg, director of the Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, said the data about how and where incarcerated students are being served allow colleges and the Illinois Department of Corrections to make informed decisions about higher education in Illinois prisons.

"The fact that around 2,000 individuals are on waitlists — almost the same number as are actually enrolled— suggests that we need to greatly scale up [higher education in prison] in Illinois," Ginsburg said.

Research shows that participating in prison education helps people find employment after release and helps keep them from going back to prison. In Illinois, some people who complete educational programs can also earn time off their sentences, allowing them to be released earlier.

Incarcerated Lewis University students sit during a class inside Sheridan Correctional Center, which is located about 70 miles southwest of Chicago. Photo: Charlotte West / Open Campus

That means lots of people locked up in Illinois want to get into higher education programs, but they routinely complain about long waitlists, or that programs simply aren't available at many prisons.

"Some of the things that hold programs back from sustainable growth include access to classroom space inside prisons and funding," Ginsburg said.

How long's the wait? Depends on geography

The data show wait lists vary wildly across Illinois, depending on the prison. The longest waits in the system are at Logan Correctional Center, the state's main women's prison, where people have been on an education wait list for an average of almost five years. The longest wait at a men's facility is at Danville Correctional Center, where people have been on wait lists an average of 4.2 years.

The system generally prioritizes educating people who are the closest to being released, but this leaves some behind for decades.

At Big Muddy River Correctional Center, one person has been on a waitlist since 2006 — nearly 19 years — and many others have been waiting more than five years. At Logan, at least seven women have been on the wait list since 2013. Most of those with the longest waits are serving life or other long sentences.

IDOC spokesperson Naomi Puzzello acknowledged the geographic disparities, saying the department is "optimistic" about expanding education with current and potential education partners, particularly in central and southern Illinois, where the need is greatest.

Many of the longest wait times are at the facilities that offer the most educational opportunities. Logan, for instance, is the only Illinois women's prison that offers significant higher education opportunities, including a bachelor's program from Northwestern University and a master's program from North Park University.

Danville offers classes from the U of

I, as well as associate's and bachelor's degrees. At Sheridan prison, the waitlist has grown significantly in the last few years with the facility absorbing Northwestern's bachelor's program when Stateville Correctional Center shut down in 2024. It's also home to other programs, such as Lewis University.

Some facilities have very short waitlists — not because they efficiently serve students, but because they offer very few educational opportunities. Menard Correctional Center, the state's largest maximum security men's prison, has just eight people enrolled in higher education and eight people on the waitlist. The facility, located in far southwestern Illinois, offers only two training programs — building maintenance and small engines — but no college classes, according to the IDOC website.

Pontiac Correctional Center, a men's maximum security facility housing almost 500 people, shows no waitlist because it offers only basic education and high school equivalency programs — no college classes, according to the IDOC website.

Waitlist time down for high school-level courses

The statewide enrollment figures may appear to overstate the scope of prison-based higher education. Around 700 people — or a quarter of those the IDOC reported as being enrolled in higher education — are on supervised release. That means they are enrolled in outside institutions, not participating in prison-based classes.

The waitlists extend beyond higher education to basic literacy and high school programs. Nearly 12,000 people participated in adult basic education and high school equivalency programs, with over 5,000 more waiting for access. The report doesn't break down these waitlists by facility, but data on educational spending shows disparities across institutions.

Puzzello said that wait times are down significantly for students earning their high school equivalency within IDOC.

"With increased education staffing across facilities, more students are enrolling in and completing programs, including successfully meeting testing requirements for credentialing," Puzzello wrote in an email to WBEZ.

The data comes from a first-of-its-kind report on prison higher education published at the beginning of September. In 2023, Illinois lawmakers passed legislation requiring IDOC to annually publish detailed data about enrollment, waitlists, and spending on educational programs.

This story was originally published on Sept. 10, 2025.

More than 900 people now say they were abused at Illinois youth prisons

By Lauren Frost

Attorneys say more than 900 survivors have now come forward alleging they suffered child sexual abuse at juvenile detention centers in Illinois between 1995 and 2022.

A new batch of complaints were filed July 15, and lawyers say they include 107 new cases of abuse. Plaintiffs claim they were raped, groped, and threatened—all while in the custody of an Illinois Youth Center or the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, formerly known as the Audy Home.

"These survivors want justice, and they want accountability and they want sexual abuse in the Illinois juvenile justice system to end," said attorney Jerome Block.

At a press conference after civil cases were filed, adult survivors shared stories of what they experienced as teenagers at youth detention facilities. One woman, who prefers to go by her first name Kate-Lynn, recounted an alleged incident at Illinois Youth Center Warrenville where at least five staff members entered her cell and took off her clothes. Then, she said, a male staff member sat on her naked body and touched her inappropriately.

"My life has been severely impacted by the trauma I experienced at the hands of these state employees at IYC Warrenville," said Kate-Lynn.

Charles Graves said he was sexually assaulted by three officers in Illinois. Graves also said he encountered one of his alleged abusers again while visiting his nephew in the juvenile system.

"They need to understand what took place, and they need to do something to start helping prevent it."

In a statement, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice said it is aware of the recently filed lawsuits and cannot comment on active litigation.

The alleged victims are represented by the law groups Bailey & Glasser, Levy Konigsberg, DiCello Levitt, and Anapol Weiss.

This story was originally published on July 16, 2025.

PRISONCAST! + Mud Theatre Project
present...
"The Story of Violence"
a radio play
Airs Sunday, Nov. 9 at 2 p.m. on WNIJ
Airs Thursday, Nov. 6 at 7 p.m. on all other stations

After years of poor care, preventable deaths, Illinois is changing its prison health care provider

Big Muddy River Correctional Center, located in downstate Ina, about 300 miles south of Chicago. Photo: Manuel Martinez / WBEZ

By Lauren Frost

The medical care of the nearly 30,000 people locked up in Illinois state prisons is in limbo, after the Illinois Department of Corrections announced negotiations with its chosen health care provider hit an impasse.

In 2023, IDOC awarded a new $4 billion contract to Wexford Health Sources, Inc. The move drew outcry from attorneys who represent incarcerated people because the private company has a track record of substandard care and preventable deaths.

Now, in recent memos sent to correctional staff and people in custody, prison officials say negotiations over that contract have stalled. The state revoked its selection of Wexford and inked a short-term emergency contract with another provider, Centurion Health, to run the department's troubled health care system.

"They need more people, they need better people, they need better supervision, they need better organization, and they need it fast," said Harold Hirshman, a lawyer who has represented incarcerated people in two lawsuits over physical and mental health care in Illinois prisons.

The Illinois Department of Corrections did not answer WBEZ's inquiry about what the sticking points were in its negotiations with Wexford. Instead, a spokesperson pointed to the emergency purchase statement that says "the contract would not provide for consideration of all factors of significance to the State."

The company's shortcomings are well-documented and were known to IDOC when the agency once again chose Wexford as its vendor in 2023. A court-appointed monitor has found medical staff shortages and improper care leading to suffering and loss of life. A review of 107 deaths, filed in federal court in 2024 but sent to the state earlier, identified nearly 900 issues with how cases were handled — including multiple patients found to be malnourished after their deaths.

Wexford Health Sources did not respond to WBEZ's request for comment.

Centurion Health has also faced criticism of the care it has provided to incarcerated people. Centurion did not respond to WBEZ's questions about its history in other states or what its plans are for Illinois.

Jenny Vollen-Katz, executive director of the John Howard Association, an independent prison monitor, said there's hope the Centurion contract could represent a slight improvement.

But she also thinks it's concerning for any private company to be responsible for the health care of people in custody.

"If your goal is to make money doing this, then you're sort of incentivized not to provide as much care or not to have as many tests conducted," she said. "So there is this sort of inherent problem with a for-profit medical vendor providing care to people who are in prison."

In June 23 memos announcing the change, IDOC Director Latoya Hughes writes the department is "actively working to minimize disruptions," and that it is "committed to a smooth and efficient transition."

The department's emergency purchase statement says Centurion was chosen due to its past "successful transitions in large state systems," like the Florida and Georgia Departments of Corrections.

"Whether they have the management skills to turn the situation around with what we consider to be the inadequate number of staff — I think they'd have to be Houdini, frankly, to pull that off," Hirshman said.

Hirshman said he doesn't want the health problems of incarcerated people to fall through the cracks during this transition. "I just hope the governor pays attention," Hirshman said, "and knows that this is an opportunity to do something different, do something better, do something imaginative, which could be a beacon for other states."

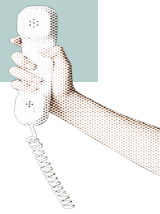
This story was originally published on July 16, 2025.

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

What is your advice for incarcerated parents?

"One thing I do to stay connected to my kids [is] talk to them through phone calls, writing, and messaging."

Tosha, Logan C.C.



"I take the time to write my son! Send him math problems to do and encourage him to be better than me!"

Shirice, Menard C.C.

"Show constant growth via schooling & spiritual growth. They still watch you."

Devon, Western Illinois C.C.

"Lying to little, little kids about where you are doesn't protect them. You're just building distrust due to shame. They will come to know the truth always. Don't you be the one keeping the truth from them."

Dustin, Western Illinois C.C.

"My son is a grown man. He is in the Army and currently deployed. I call him as often as I can and I have to practice patience when he isn't able to answer. Advice? Keep reaching out and remember your kids need you."

Shannon, Taylorville C.C.

Tell us what you think!

The long-anticipated tablets have rolled out, so what do you think? What do you love and what do you hate? Pros and cons? What questions do you have? Let us know for future coverage in this newsletter and on Prisoncast! We also want to hear about your experience with the sudden changes to IDOC snail mail policies. Mail your thoughts to:

WBEZ Prisoncast!
848 E. Grand Ave.
Chicago, IL. 60611

"As for advice, make whatever you do fun + silly. One Christmas, the whole family agreed to flip their left sock inside out, as a symbol of us all still being together."

Carrie, Logan C.C.

"As a father and a grandparent, the duty is on me to stay active as possible... We must get at them in positive, inspiring and productive, loving ways."

Delandis, Dixon C.C.

Inside Illinois

A round-up of criminal justice news from around the state

Logan women sue over alleged sexual assault by staff

Seven women filed federal lawsuits in September against Logan Correctional Center staffers who they said sexually assaulted them while they were incarcerated.

The lawsuits say the women were sexually assaulted by correctional and internal affairs officers in broom closets and other areas where the prison staff knew there were no cameras. They also said attempts to report the abuse were mostly ignored or resulted in retaliation from prison officials, who are also named in the complaints.

Nicole Schult, legal director of Uptown People's Law Center, said the women came forward with their complaints because "every single one of them wants to make sure that this doesn't happen to other women in custody."

In a statement, the IDOC said it can't comment on active litigation. But it added that "all allegations of staff misconduct are immediately and thoroughly investigated internally and in partnership with the Illinois State Police when appropriate."

The Illinois State Police did not immediately confirm whether the incidents described in the complaints are being investigated. - *Anna Savchenko*

Earned time update

As of Aug. 1, 2025, approximately 2,038 people in custody have had their sentencing credits reviewed under the Illinois' earned time law, HB 3026, according to the Illinois Department of Corrections. Out of those who have been reviewed, 1,102 people are still in custody and 936 were released.

That's a slight increase from January 2025, when approximately 2,019 people had had their sentencing credits reviewed, with 1,213 still in custody and 806 released.

In a March hearing, a state judge ruled that a lawsuit challenging how the corrections department has implemented the change in its earned time law could proceed. Attorneys say the case is still in the discovery phase. - *Charlotte West*

'Truth-in-sentencing' overhaul stalls again

Two bills that would have abolished (or at least scaled back) Illinois' so-called "truth-in-sentencing" law failed to get approval from state lawmakers this spring.

H.B. 2367, sponsored by State Rep. Barbara Hernandez, D-Aurora, would have completely repealed the law. But that bill never made it out of a House committee.

H.B. 3449, sponsored by State Rep. Justin Slaughter, D-Chicago, would chip away at the truth-in-sentencing statute by reducing the amount of time people locked up under the law have to serve 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%. But that bill, too, missed a legislative deadline and got stuck in committee. - *Alex Keefe*

Retroactive youthful parole bill fails in House

In April, state lawmakers voted down a bill that would have made an earlier youth resentencing bill retroactive.

House Bill 3332 would have made people eligible for resentencing for crimes committed when they were under 21, provided they'd already served ten years in prison. For first-degree murder, the time served would have to be 20 years, and 30 years for child murder convictions.

But that bill faced bipartisan opposition when it went to the full Illinois House. It was defeated by a vote of 51 to 49. Thirteen Democrats joined Republicans in voting "no." The bill could be reintroduced in a later General Assembly, but likely can't be brought up for a vote again this year.

Bills in Springfield essentially must be approved by committees by a certain deadline, or else they essentially die for the current session. Laws that do pass through committees must survive several more committee votes in the legislature, win approval by the full House and Senate and be signed by the governor before becoming law. - *Alex Keefe*

'Orange Crush' lawsuit defeated

A decade-old class action lawsuit alleging people in several downstate Illinois prisons were abused by a tactical team has been defeated in trial.

The complaint filed in federal court claimed a squad of specially trained officers — known colloquially as "Orange Crush" — beat, harassed or confiscated the property of hundreds of incarcerated people in 2014, violating the Eighth Amendment. The defendants, which included those in supervisory roles within IDOC, argued the shakedowns were not designed to humiliate or cause pain but rather search for contraband. In April 2025, a jury in Benton, Ill. sided with the department.

"Even if we didn't win at trial, I think what we did accomplish is get the story out there," said attorney Shireen Jalali-Yazdi with Uptown People's Law Center, one of the groups representing people locked up at the four prisons in question.

Jalali-Yazdi said the plaintiffs are requesting a new trial. She also said the pro se lawsuits consolidated with the class action lawsuit are now getting deconsolidated, so incarcerated people can pursue their own claims against individual correctional officers. - *Lauren Frost*

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 something families can share together.

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?

If you have an idea for a future *Prisoncast!* show, 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. People outside can make requests & record a voicemail dedication at **312-893-2931**, or send a voice memo or email to **prisoncast@wbez.org**.

I wrote to Prisoncast! a while ago but never heard back from you. What gives?

We work hard to keep in direct contact with you all on the inside, either electronically or via snail mail. But as you might imagine, we get hundreds of letters and messages! We read all of it, and are grateful for what you send us; we literally can't make *Prisoncast!* without your engagement. But it may take us a few weeks — or even a couple of months — to respond to letters and tablet messages, and we can't guarantee we'll respond to every one.

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 (find your local station below). You may also listen on a tablet or kiosk's FM radio app. The program airs on NPR (National Public Radio) stations all across Illinois. Please note that some correctional facilities have spotty or no radio coverage! Soon you will also be able to listen digitally on your tablet's Edovo app! Our next show is Nov. 6th on most stations (see p. 6).

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		

***Prisoncast!*: a special journalism & audio project for people in Illinois prisons**

WBEZ Chicago & public radio stations across Illinois are collaborating on two upcoming radio broadcasts for people in Illinois prisons & jails, and their loved ones. Check the last page of this mailing for your closest station.

Prisoncast! & Mud Theatre Project present *The Story of Violence* on **Thursday, Nov. 6th at 7 p.m. CT** (WBEZ, WCBU, WGLT, WILL, WIUM, WSIU, WUIS, WVIK) or **Sunday, Nov. 9th at 2 p.m.** (WNIJ). This radio play, based on an award-winning script by incarcerated writers at Dixon Correctional Center, examines Chicago's gun violence problem through five characters' perspectives as their lives intersect at a downtown hotel room.

The Prisoncast! Holiday Show will air on **Sunday, Dec. 14th at 2 p.m. CT** on all stations. This show will feature songs, sounds and information requested by people in prisons & jails and their loved ones.

Please fill out this survey and tell us what you want to hear. Mail responses to: **Prisoncast! c/o WBEZ, 848 E. Grand Ave., Chicago, IL, 60611-3509**. Loved ones can also leave voicemail requests & dedications at **312-893-2931**, or email **prisoncast@wbez.org. *All submissions must be received no later than Nov. 7th.***

1. **Your name:** 2. **Your nickname/preferred name:**
3. **Your pronouns:** ☐ he/him ☐ she/her ☐ they/them ☐ other_____
4. **Can we use your name & quote you on the radio, online and on social media?** ☐ yes ☐ no

5. *Prisoncast!* seeks to serve you & your loved ones outside with accurate news & practical information. Is there a question you have for our journalists, an issue we can explore or explain, or a topic you think we should address in our broadcasts?

6. What is a sound from outside prison walls you'd like us to record and broadcast? Why do you want to hear that sound? Previous requests have taken us to baseball games, ocean yachts, rollercoasters, & Niagara Falls. Think big (or small) & be creative! *(NOTE: If recording the sound will require us being in touch with someone outside, please provide contact information. If the sound occurs at a specific location, please elaborate.)*

7. Is there a song you'd like us to play during the show? Why do you want to hear that song? Feel free to dedicate your request to a family member, a friend, or a community.

8. The winter holidays can be a difficult time of year for people who are incarcerated. How do you manage your mental & emotional wellbeing during the holidays? Do you have strategies for navigating or celebrating the holidays inside to share with others?

9. How do you make decisions about how to spend your money inside? How much money do you budget for different expenses like commissary food, toiletries, tablet use, etc.? What factors into those decisions?

10. What's something you want people on the outside to know about you or your life on the inside? (Please respond on the back side of this paper.)

11. How did you get this survey and learn about *Prisoncast!*? Aside from radio, how else can we reach you inside with news & information?