



John Howard Association of Illinois

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS HAZARDS, CRUMBLING INFRASTRUCTURE AT YOUTH CENTER

The Illinois Youth Center at St. Charles, where 275 boys are confined, is replete with dangerous beds, toilets, air vent covers and other hazards that provide opportunities for self-harm, according to a facility study conducted by the John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA).

In addition, numerous buildings on the 125-acre IYC campus are crumbling and abandoned due to years of neglected maintenance. The building housing the facility's chapel, featuring an original mural by world-renowned Chicago artist Warner Sallman, has been closed due to mold and mildew problems caused by a leaking roof.

“Our findings on the appalling state of this facility vividly highlight the need for immediate action, including the appropriation of additional funds to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). Incarcerated youth deserve to be safe and housed in a humane environment that speaks of care, not of abandonment and neglect,” said Hanke Gratteau, JHA executive director.

Following the tragic suicide of a 16-year-old boy at the facility on September 1, 2009, and at the invitation of the IDJJ, the John Howard Association dispatched a team of staff, board members and trained volunteers to examine the physical conditions of the facility. The September 14 site visit included an inspection of all sleeping rooms contained in the facility's 10 housing units.

The findings are contained in a 13-page report that details hazards that lend themselves to self-harm. It also outlines specific factual findings concerning the physical plant and contains recommendations for immediate steps that can be taken to remediate the dangerous conditions.

The JHA report, which includes photographs taken by the team during the site visit, was forward to Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and key legislators urging them to act immediately to remedy the most egregious physical conditions.

Specifically, the report recommends:

>Eliminating the practice of double-bunking and replacing all bunk beds with state-of-the-art, solid piece correctional beds that do not feature posts or legs from which to tie off;

>Replacing vent covers and old porcelain sinks and toilets in sleeping rooms as well as shower heads, soap dishes and hooks in shower rooms that pose risks to self-harm;

>Increasing staff-to-resident ratios and/or installing two-way auditory devices or cameras in sleeping rooms.

In addition, the Association has urged the governor and legislators to review the September, 2007 “Master Plan” of the entire facility prepared by a team of experts which analyzed all structures at St. Charles and proposed modifications, improvements and repairs. This report was never released or acted upon by then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich. Since then, buildings have continued to deteriorate and now pose serious, chronic sanitation and maintenance deficiencies.

Abandoned buildings, some with caved-in roofs, riddle the campus. The old Academic Building, which houses the chapel and former Wood Shop, has been closed due to buckling floors and mold and mildew caused by a failing roof. Roads through the campus are nearly impassable because of deep, crumbling potholes. The 10 housing units have numerous broken floor tiles that cannot be fixed because of asbestos hazards. Roofing and drainage problems have caused water damage; and energy-inefficient heating and air conditioning units frequently break down. Window frames in the housing units have rusted through to the outside.

The JHA reports contains no programmatic recommendations as the IDJJ, with the assistance of outside experts funded by the Catherine T. and John D. MacArthur Foundation’s Models for Change Initiative, is conducting a thorough review of existing policy, programs and best practices as they relate to the behavioral health needs of juveniles in the Department. In previous reports, JHA has commented on the need for additional teachers, counselors, mental health professionals and other programmatic and recreation staff.

“It is important to note that no facility can ever be fully suicide-proof,” said Patricia Connell, who leads the JHA Juvenile Justice Programs. “But we cannot allow youth entrusted to the state’s care to be housed under these conditions.”

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