



## John Howard Association of Illinois

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### Monitoring Visit to Vandalia Correctional Center 6/20/2011

On June 20, 2011, the John Howard Association visited Vandalia Correctional Center, a male minimum-security prison. It is located in Vandalia, Illinois about four and a half hours south of Chicago and one and a half hours southeast of Springfield.



#### Vital Statistics:

Population: 1,748  
Rated Capacity: 1,100  
Operational Capacity: 1,784  
Average Annual Cost  
Per Inmate: \$23,528  
Average Length of Stay: 7 months,  
15 days  
Average Age: 34  
(Source: IDOC 6/20/2011)

#### Key Observations:

- Vandalia suffers from overcrowding which is compounded by the deteriorating physical state of some of its housing units. Several hundred inmates are housed in dormitory basements that JHA found to be in exceptionally poor condition and in need of repair and renovation.
- Vandalia's overcrowded conditions should serve as a warning to Illinois' governor and legislature that if they do not reduce the population, and provide the funding, resources, and staffing needed to meet the population's basic needs, a lawsuit cannot be far behind.
- Vandalia's administration has made changes and is undertaking ongoing efforts to improve the quality of life for inmates. The administration is currently formulating and implementing a programming expansion plan in order to provide inmates with greater access to rehabilitative services, education and job training.
- The racial makeup of Vandalia's population is about 61 percent African-American; 28 percent White; 10 percent Hispanic; less than one percent Asian; and less than one percent other, non-specified ethnicity. Half of Vandalia's population was convicted in Cook County.

## **Monitoring Visit to Vandalia Correctional Center 6/20/2011**

### **Executive Summary**

On June 20, 2011, the John Howard Association (JHA) visited Vandalia Correctional Center (Vandalia). Vandalia is a Level Six minimum-security adult male facility that is located 85 miles southeast of Springfield and houses mostly low-level offenders in barracks-style dormitories. It has 113 buildings totaling 412,000 square feet and a surrounding acreage of 1,520, with eight acres contained within the perimeter fence. Vandalia first opened in 1921 and was originally designed as a prison farm, where inmates worked raising livestock and growing crops during the day, and slept at night in the dormitories. Staff and administration showed JHA historic photos of the farm and recounted how “old-timers,” both inmates and guards, who were at Vandalia when it was a working prison farm remembered it as a positive place that helped many men turn their lives around.

Much has changed. Today, the farm is no longer operating, the facility’s crop acres have largely been leased to surrounding farms, and the cows have all been sold. Whatever rehabilitative spirit once animated Vandalia, the facility now serves primarily as a vehicle for warehousing low-level offenders in crowded dormitories and basements.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Vandalia’s past, these low-level offenders today have few opportunities to obtain the rehabilitative treatment, education, vocational training, and job skills needed for safe, successful reentry into the community.

Portions of the 90-year-old prison showed every bit of their age on the date of JHA’s visit. Vandalia’s most obvious issue is the deteriorating physical state of some of its buildings. The upper-levels of the dormitories JHA visited have declined with age, neglect and general lack of maintenance. Further, the basements of the dorms used to house the additional inmate population are in exceptionally poor condition and in need of repair and renovation to house inmates safely and humanely.

Indeed, JHA found the floor of one of the basement dorms flooded with approximately a quarter to a half of an inch of water at the time of its visit. In some recessed spots of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vandalia’s population does not consist of hardened, violent criminals; rather, a large portion was convicted of Class 4 offenses. See Illinois Department of Corrections Quarterly Report, July 1, 2011, available at [http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/reports/quarterly\\_reports](http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/reports/quarterly_reports). In Illinois, felony offenses (other than murder) are categorized in descending order of seriousness and sentencing range as Class X, Class 1, Class 2, Class 3, or Class 4 (with Class X being the most serious, and Class 4 being the least serious and consisting of such low-level offenses as simple possession of less than 1 gram of illegal drugs for personal use).

floor, JHA measured three-fourths of an inch of stagnant, dirty water pooling in the inmates' living areas.

The administration reported that such flooding was an anomaly and an isolated incident resulting from an excessive, unprecedented amount of rainfall. The administration further indicated that the dorms are cleaned daily by assigned dormitory porters, who also assist in cleaning up the water. Inmates and staff reported, however, that such flooding is not an anomaly, but a recurrent problem in the basement dorms. At any given time, roughly 60 to 100 inmates are housed in each of four dormitory basements – which are referred to as the “lower-level dormitories” by the administration.

JHA found the conditions in these lower-level, dormitory basements to be unsafe, unsanitary, and unacceptable. The blame lies not with Vandalia's administration, however, but with the Illinois governor and legislature, who created this deplorable situation. The suspension of Meritorious Good Time credit (MGT) in December 2010, by the Illinois governor has greatly exacerbated prison overcrowding – particularly in minimum security facilities like Vandalia, whose low-level, non-violent offender populations are most affected by MGT's suspension.<sup>2</sup> Despite this crisis in overcrowding, the governor and legislature have refused to address the issue or take prudent action to replace MGT.

As a direct result of MGT's suspension, Vandalia was forced to absorb more than 300 additional inmates into a facility already bursting at its seams with a population that far exceeds its design capacity.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the only place to house the additional inmates is in dormitory basements which JHA found to be neither safe nor suitable as living quarters. At the same time, while dramatically increasing the prison population, the legislature has slashed the budget of the Department of Corrections (DOC), allocating the DOC \$110 million less than requested. In disregard of the emergent physical plant issues at Vandalia and other DOC facilities, the legislature further cut the DOC's repair and maintenance budget by nearly 25 percent. Following JHA's visit, the administration moved 90 inmates from the basement levels of dorms J, K, and L dorms to the gym, which is now being used temporarily as a dorm.

Recently, in *Brown v. Plata*, 131 S. Ct. 1910 (2011), the United States Supreme Court held that conditions in California prisons caused by overcrowding violated the constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment, and ordered the state to drastically reduce its prison population to remedy this. The court observed that cramming inmates “into spaces neither designed nor intended to house inmates” is “incompatible

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<sup>2</sup> The Meritorious Good Time credit statute, 730 ILCS 5/3-6-3, allowed prison officials to award up to 180 days good conduct sentencing credit “for meritorious service in specific instances as the Director deems proper” to eligible inmates. Inmates convicted of certain violent offenses, such as murder, sexual assault, and aggravated battery with a firearm, were ineligible for sentence reductions under the MGT statute.

<sup>3</sup> DOC's quarterly report of October 1, 2009, indicates that Vandalia's total inmate population on August 31, 2009, prior to the suspension of MGT, was 1,401 – roughly 300 less inmates than at time of JHA's visit.

with the concept of human dignity” and has no place in a “civilized society.” The court reasoned that “as a consequence of their own actions, prisoners may be deprived of rights that are fundamental to liberty,” but they still “retain the essence of human dignity inherent in all persons.”

Vandalia dramatically illustrates that if the Illinois governor and legislature do not act quickly to replace MGT, reduce the population, and provide the funding, resources, and staffing needed to meet the population’s basic needs, a lawsuit cannot be far behind.

### ***Recommendations:***

- (1) In 2004, former Governor Rod Blagojevich proposed closing Vandalia. This proposal is not practical today, given the sheer size of the Illinois prison population. Rather, to address the immediate constitutional crisis of prison overcrowding, Illinois lawmakers must act to reduce the population at Vandalia and facilities across the state.

Lawmakers could safely, effectively and economically accomplish this task by: (1) replacing MGT; (2) investing in community-based treatment alternatives to incarceration, like Redeploy Illinois, for low-level, non-violent offenders; (3) employing more effective parole and probation practices; and (4) instituting rehabilitative and reentry services designed to reduce recidivism.<sup>4</sup> Adopting some or all of these measures would eliminate the need to house inmates in Vandalia’s basements and allow the facility to function more safely and smoothly for inmates and staff alike. By whatever means necessary, however, inmates should be relocated from the dormitory basements that flood to other housing. Relocating some of Vandalia’s inmates from the basement dormitories to the gym for housing, while a temporary solution, ultimately presents the same problem as in *Plata*, in that gyms are “neither designed nor intended to house inmates.”

Apart from acting to reduce the population, the state cannot ignore Vandalia, but must reinvest in it as a correctional institution. The inescapable reality is that inmates are housed, and will continue to be housed, at Vandalia long into the foreseeable future. Elected officials cannot in good conscience turn away from Vandalia’s plight, treat it as a temporary dilemma, and court disaster. Rather, Vandalia’s administration must be provided with the resources, staffing and funding it needs to restore the facility’s physical plant and deliver basic services and rehabilitation programs to the population. As it stands, warehousing low-level

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<sup>4</sup> The American Bar Association, after long study and in collaboration with corrections officials, prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys, academics, and persons with prior convictions has endorsed similar measures as a safe and cost-effective means of reducing incarceration rates. See ABA Recommendations 2007, available at <http://www.abanet.org.cecs/secondchances>.

- offenders in poor living conditions and releasing them, resentful and traumatized, back into the community without job skills, education or rehabilitative treatment can only compromise public safety and cost the state more money in the long run.
- (2) Ongoing efforts should be made to provide greater rehabilitative services, job training, employment opportunities in industries, and educational and vocational programming to inmates. To that end, the administration should continue to implement its programming expansion plan. Given that Vandalia is a minimum security facility, the use of volunteers is also a viable, cost-effective means by which educational and vocational programming could potentially be increased. Volunteers currently are used only to assist in religious programming. Efforts should be made to recruit and use volunteers in other areas of programming, such as literacy and job skills.
- (3) JHA recognizes that Vandalia's administration and the DOC have no control over the funding allocated by the Illinois legislature. However, implementing small measures could greatly improve the morale and quality of life of Vandalia's inmates, significantly decrease tension and discontent, and improve the safety and stability of the facility as a whole.

To that end, measures should be implemented at Vandalia to ensure that inmates have sufficient time to consume their food at mealtimes and the opportunity to socialize during meals. In addition, a greater number of working fans should be provided to improve air circulation and prevent overheating in the general population dormitories and the segregation unit.

The administration is to be strongly commended on instituting new measures to improve inmates' quality of life, such as purchasing more hotpots for the general population dorms and providing segregation inmates with one additional hour of out-of-cell recreation time per week. Instituting additional measures – such as reinforcing the import of professionalism and courtesy by staff towards inmates and providing segregation inmates with more than one shower a week and additional out-of-cell time – could further improve inmates' well-being and should also be considered and pursued.

- (4) Given that a very large number of inmates and several staff reported suffering from spider bites, as well as respiratory problems from mold and poor air quality, these two health issues should be closely monitored by the administration and the Vandalia's health care unit. If these health issues prove to be systemic, as the inmates and staff who talked with JHA suggested, an appropriate public health intervention should be undertaken to determine their causes and remedy the conditions facility-wide. To its credit, the administration has been very proactive in following up on these issues.

## **Introduction**

This report examines the following issues: Housing and Living Conditions; Health Concerns; Meals and Diet; Correctional Staff Conduct; Segregation; Education; Industries; Clinical Services; Vocational Programming; Physical and Mental Health; and Population Demographics.

### **Housing and Living Conditions**

#### **Housing**

Vandalia consists of a main correctional facility and a work camp facility. All inmates, except those in the segregation unit, are housed in open barracks-style dormitories in double bunks that are spaced about three feet apart. Inmates in each dorm share access to communal bathroom and shower areas, as well as laundry facilities. Each dorm has a community area located adjacent to the living area which contains a television and seating for approximately 30 to 40 inmates.

At the time of JHA's visit, the dorms in the main facility, originally designed to house 700 inmates, housed 1,340 inmates; approximately 191% over the rated design capacity. Together, Vandalia's main facility and work camp housed 1,700 inmates, roughly 157% over the rated design capacity.<sup>5</sup>

Vandalia's twelve dorms are designated by letters, A through M, with the exception that there is no C dorm. The basements of four of Vandalia's dorms, J, K, L and M, are used to house the additional inmate population. The dorms are not air-conditioned.

JHA had the opportunity to visit two dormitories, L-dorm and K-dorm. JHA found the general atmosphere there to be overcrowded, unpleasant, unmanageable, and seemingly difficult for staff to monitor. On entering the dorms, large numbers of inmates approached JHA's staff and volunteers and urgently asked to speak about their living conditions.

Approximately 100 inmates are housed on the upper level of K-dorm, and 60 are housed in the basement. Approximately 98 inmates are housed on each the upper level and basement levels of L-dorm. The administration reported that separate fire exit doors are located on both the basement and upper levels of every dorm.

JHA found the living conditions in the L-dorm basement to be alarming and unsanitary. At the time of JHA's visit, heavy rains had caused substantial flooding. The stairs leading down to the basement were wet and slippery. The cement floors in the living and bathroom areas were covered with approximately a quarter of an inch to half of an inch of

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<sup>5</sup> See Illinois Department of Corrections Quarterly Report, July 1, 2011, available at [http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/reports/quarterly\\_reports](http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/reports/quarterly_reports).

standing water. JHA measured three-fourths of an inch of water in several depressed areas in the floor of the inmates' living quarters.

In the basement, JHA found inmates frantically scurrying back and forth trying to mop up water. One inmate was using a wet-vacuum near the stairs and another, a mop. Multiple inmates were continuously dragging squeegees across the floor to reroute the water away from their sleeping areas and into a central location to be vacuumed up.

Inmates indicated they had been instructed by staff to keep their bunk areas free of water, or risk receiving a ticket and being sent to segregation. It was not clear how inmates could accomplish this task, particularly given the reports that the flooding of L-dorm was caused by water seeping up through the foundation and the floor. Responding to JHA's report, the administration indicated, however, that it knew that inmates could not control the flooding and that no tickets had or would be issued to them for failing to keep bunk areas free of water.

Inmates reported that in the three weeks preceding JHA's visit, the L-dorm basement had flooded about three times. On one occasion, the flooding was so severe that inmates that were required to leave their personal property and bed down on mats on the floor of the gym overnight. Inmates and staff reported that some other dormitory basements at Vandalia likewise flood after heavy rain. According to inmates, it generally takes longer than a week for the water to be vacuumed up.

The administration reported that flooding occurred on the lower-levels of two of Vandalia's twelve dorms, M-dorm and L-dorm, and that flooding was most severe in the L-dorm. The administration further reported that, following JHA's visit, a sump pump was purchased for the L-dorm and new drainage spouts were installed to direct rainwater away from that facility.

Some inmates with bunk beds located against the cement walls in L-dorm's basement reported that even when the basement was not flooded their sheets were always damp from humidity in the walls. A number of inmates reported they had been dumping buckets of water all day long. Several inmates are assigned as porters to regularly clean the dorms. During the flooding, they were assigned to help clean up the water. One such porter reported to JHA that he awoke at 4 a.m. on the day of JHA's visit to begin his assignment of wet-vacuuming up water as it came up through the foundation and floor.

JHA found the air quality in both L-dorm and K-dorm to be very poor, in that it was hot, dank, and smelled strongly of mold and mildew. A great number of inmates, as well as some staff, reported suffering breathing problems and asthmatic symptoms because of mold and poor air quality. Responding to JHA's report, the administration indicated that it followed up with its health care unit, which indicated that no respiratory problems had been reported by staff or inmates in the preceding three months.

JHA likewise found the air circulation and ventilation in both L-dorm and K-dorm to be very poor, particularly in the basements. Because Vandalia's housing is dormitory-style, inmates cannot buy fans to cool their individual areas, as there are not enough individual power outlets. At the time of JHA's visit, only two of the four large circulatory fans used to cool and ventilate the K-dorm were working. According to inmates and staff, the fans had been broken for some time. Inmates reported that several circulatory fans in other dormitories were broken as well. The administration indicated that a circulatory fan in one other dormitory was broken, but that eight new fans had been ordered for use throughout the facility.

Several inmates reported that power outages were also a common problem. One inmate reported a terrifying occasion when he and other inmates were locked together in a dorm overnight, without lighting or staff monitoring, after the power failed. The administration indicated that Vandalia had experienced only one five-hour power outage and this was not a common occurrence. The administration further indicated that a mandatory protocol is executed during a power outage whereby correctional staff members are issued flashlights and lanterns to monitor inmates in the dorms.

The upper level and basement level of K-dorm, while not flooded on the date of JHA's visit, were nonetheless in a state of disrepair and in need of much renovation and maintenance. The bunks themselves were neat and tidy, but the surrounding physical plant was in poor condition. There were large holes in the ceiling above the stairs leading to the basement and above a communal area upstairs, exposing the ceiling's interior wood braces. The holes appeared to have been caused by water damage. Following JHA's visit, the administration reported that these holes in the ceiling were repaired and painted.

During JHA's visit, several inmates pointed out one area of the ceiling that had wires hanging down and indicated a light fixture previously had been attached there, but had come crashing down one night. Responding to JHA's report, the administration indicated that this incident had not been reported. Inmates also indicated that several light fixtures did not function.

Several inmates further reported that tears in window screens prevented them from opening windows because they did not want to let insects inside. Inmates also noted that several window panes were also broken or missing. JHA noted at least one such missing window pane during the visit. Following JHA's visit, the administration indicated that tears in the window screens had been repaired.

Inmates on the upper level of K-dorm also reported to JHA that rainwater leaks through the ceiling and comes through door when it rains. Numerous inmates indicated their mattresses had become wet and mildewed as a result of rainwater dripping from the ceiling onto their bunks. The administration reported that it was aware of these problems, that it had obtained funding to reroof the facility, and that it currently was soliciting bids for that project.

JHA found the sleeping areas of the upper and basement levels of K-dorm overcrowded with inmates and bunks. Four inmates were waiting in line to use the phone. One double-bunk on the upper level was located directly next to a communal toilet and separated from it by only a five-foot metal partition. In addition, one of the metal partitions used to separate one communal toilet from the other was twisted, broken, and hanging from the wall. The administration reported that this partition was repaired following JHA's visit.

JHA volunteers also observed that a water fountain in the upstairs communal bathroom of K-dorm was not working properly and smelled strongly of burning plastic. Inmates had noted this previously, and wisely left the water fountain unplugged most of the time. Although inmates stated they had reported the condition to staff, it had yet to be fixed. Disturbingly, correctional staff that JHA met while visiting the dorms seemed extremely despondent and apathetic, and expressed no alarm or concern about the conditions.

A communal shower area that JHA inspected had 12 shower heads and appeared moldy and poorly ventilated. It also contained accumulations of hair. The ceiling next to the shower area on the upper-level of K-dorm was distinctly bowed inward, suggesting structural damage. Several inmates in both K-dorm and L-dorm independently reported to JHA that something, which they described as "black worms," came out of the walls in shower areas. The administration indicated that it had received no reports of this condition.

The communal bathroom areas in the dorms contained two urinals; a washing station; four toilets; and two large sinks, styled like troughs, with several spigots coming from the wall and emptying into a basin. A long metal shelf ran along the length of the sinks just above the spigots. Several inmates reported the sinks often clog and flood.

At time of JHA's visit, there was an old plastic water bottle shoved under the metal shelf of a sink on the upper level of K-dorm. When a correctional officer attempted to remove the water bottle in JHA's presence, the shelf began to collapse. Inmates explained to the officer and JHA that they had to put the water bottle there to hold the shelf up. The administration reported to JHA that this shelf was repaired subsequent to JHA's visit.

JHA found one of the toilets on the basement level of K-dorm was broken and wrapped with paper and tape. Inmates reported this toilet had been broken for several months, and that sewage came up from it when it rained. The administration indicated that parts had been ordered to fix the toilet, but it was still waiting to receive these.

Unlike many facilities, Vandalia inmates cannot buy televisions to use in their bunks because the dorms lack sufficient individual power outlets. Inmates reported having to share one pot and one microwave among 80 to 100 inmates. According to inmates, stress from overcrowding, poor living conditions, and competition over scarce resources results in a tense atmosphere and can lead to many inmate fights.

The administration responded there was not excessive fighting, and that about one fight between inmates occurred per week. The administration indicated, however, it was committed to making changes to improve life quality for Vandalia's inmates. As an example, the administration reported that, following JHA's visit, 18 additional hotpots had been ordered for use in the dorms. The administration further indicated that it had instituted a pilot program in H-dorm, whereby it has created an additional day room area that contains an additional television as well as more tables, chairs and board games for leisure time activities.

From speaking with Vandalia's administration, it was clear the administration would welcome the opportunity to repair and renovate the facility and provide additional programming to inmates. The practical reality is, however, that the administration's ability to implement these goals is severely curtailed by lack of funding and resources from the State.

## **Living Conditions**

### **(i) Health Concerns**

An alarming number of people – including inmates, inmates' family members, and staff – reported that inmates routinely sustain “spider bites” or “fly bites” that become infected and abscessed. One inmate showed JHA areas of scar tissue on his neck, and explained that this resulted from a spider bite that had become infected and abscessed, and ultimately had to be drained and treated with antibiotics. Another inmate indicated that a deep, indented scar on his face was the result of a spider bite.

To its credit, the administration timely followed up with JHA about these reports. It explained that Vandalia, like other facilities, has some spiders, but that the facility is exterminated once a month. The administration further reported that in the preceding three months, only two inmates sought medical treatment in the infirmary for claimed spider bites. Upon examination, spider bites were not found, but the inmates were treated prophylactically with antibiotics.

Apart from spider bites, several inmates also reported suffering from lice and scabies. The most frequent health complaint by far, however, was respiratory problems caused by mold or poor air quality. Indeed, JHA received more than two dozen reports from Vandalia inmates and their family members regarding inmates experiencing breathing difficulty and having asthmatic symptoms because of mold and poor air quality in the dorms. A staff member that JHA spoke with likewise reported that several staff members suffer from respiratory problems as well.

Following JHA's visit, the administration followed up with Vandalia's health care unit, which indicated that there were no reports of respiratory complaints in the preceding three months. The administration further indicated that maintenance staff is assigned to treat the facility for mold on a weekly basis. To its credit, the administration also

followed up by having a health services staff member assess certain portions of the dorms for mold after JHA's visit. The administration thereafter forwarded a portion of the mold assessment to JHA, which read as follows:

*Based on observations made during a 6/28/11 tour of certain Vandalia dorm areas, it is my opinion that facility personnel should not be concerned regarding alleged mold growth in dorms. The lack of visible mold growth on shower surfaces, near absence of porous building material such as drywall, and significant exhaust ventilation in all dorms leads me to conclude that Vandalia CC is actually in better shape than most facilities at inhibiting mold growth. Although some debris had accumulated around dorm exhaust fan guards, this typically occurs over time and could have been misinterpreted as mold growth. Based on observations made and testing conducted during the 6/28/11 visit, I am unable to determine the basis for recent allegation made during an external site visit regarding mold growth in dorms.*

JHA does not doubt the honesty or integrity of either the reporter or the administration. However, these findings are hard to reconcile with the observations JHA made on its visit. JHA staff and volunteers were physically present in the dorms and personally experienced poor air quality, excessive heat and humidity, and lack of ventilation and air circulation. JHA staff and volunteers breathed air in the dorms that was dank and smelled strongly of mold and mildew. JHA observed substantial flooding in L-dorm's basement, and overwhelming evidence of water damage and leaking from the ceiling in K-dorm; conditions that would naturally tend to promote the growth of mold and mildew. JHA also viewed substances in the showers and on walls that appeared to be mold and mildew. Finally, JHA received multiple, independent reports from inmates, inmates' family members, and staff to the effect that mold and poor air quality were causing breathing and respiratory problems.

#### **(ii) Meals & Diet**

A large number of inmates reported being unable to get enough to eat at mealtimes because they were rushed in and out of the dining hall and given only five to six minutes to actually consume their food. At mealtimes, inmates are marched in double line-formation into the dining hall by dorms at different times, according to a schedule. Ten minutes prior to mealtime, a buzzer sounds in the dorms to alert inmates to prepare to go to the dining hall.

Inmates stated they are not permitted to speak to each other while walking to the dining hall or during meals. Several inmates reported that they did not go to mealtimes anymore because it was so stressful and rushed, and instead relied primarily on items from the commissary.

The administration emphasized that inmates are given approximately 20 minutes to eat at mealtimes. However, one correctional staff member that JHA spoke with indicated that

inmates are routinely rushed through meals and given only a few minutes to eat. This correctional staff member explained to JHA that while he himself “was no lover of inmates,” he believed that men at least should be given enough time to eat a meal. This staff member further indicated that allowing sufficient time for eating improves the safety of a facility, by increasing inmates’ morale and satisfaction, thereby reducing tension. According to this staff member, overcrowding and lack of adequate staffing and space were the primary reasons for rushing inmates through meals.

Staff indicated that under DOC regulations, soy cannot constitute more than 25 percent of the diet provided to inmates, and inmates at Vandalia were below that percentage, in that approximately 12 to 14 percent of their diet was soy.

### **(iii) Correctional Staff Conduct**

A substantial number of inmates reported that correctional staff acted unprofessionally, and routinely mistreated, bullied, swore at, demeaned, and verbally abused inmates. As one inmate put it, ‘I know we did wrong and made mistakes, but we’re not the worst guys in the world, and these officers go out of their way to treat us like garbage.’ Other inmates reported staff abused their power by arbitrarily giving tickets to inmates when they were in a bad mood. Inmates also reported that some of the younger and less experienced staff exercised poor judgment and overreacted to situations such as cancelling yard time because one person talked in the “chow line.”

One inmate that JHA encountered twice during the visit reported that, after speaking with JHA in the library and urging JHA to visit the dormitory basements, a correctional officer subsequently approached him and threatened to write him up for “inciting a riot.” A long-time correctional officer reported to JHA that the most frequent disciplinary/security issue he encountered among inmates was unauthorized tobacco use.

A correctional officer that JHA spoke with disagreed with these characterizations and indicated that correctional staff members were doing their best under difficult circumstances, with staff shortages and minimal resources. However, this officer admitted that it could be difficult to retain experienced staff, keep up morale, and invest in the job because of poor working conditions and the uncertainty of whether the State might try to close the facility again. Vandalia is authorized to employ 225 correctional officers, 19 sergeants, 16 lieutenants, and six shift supervisors. At the time of our visit, there were 223 correctional officers, 18 sergeants, 15 lieutenants, and 6 supervisors employed by the facility.

Responding to JHA’s reports of correctional staff misconduct, the administration indicated that it considers staff professionalism to be a priority and that it holds Vandalia’s staff accountable for misconduct.

## Segregation

Vandalia's segregation unit has 30 cells and a total of 58 beds. All of the cells contain double bunks, with the exception of the first two cells in the unit, which contain single bunks and are set aside for mental health/suicide watch. At the time of JHA's visit, 32 inmates were in segregation.

The vast majority of inmates that JHA spoke with reported that they were in segregation because they had refused housing in the dorms. According to the administration, in the past about 20 inmates per month refused housing and requested to be transferred to other facilities. The administration reported that it had since stopped inmates from "manipulating" the system. Now, when an inmate refuses housing, he is given two weeks in segregation before being transferred. The administration reported that now approximately three inmates per month refuse housing. The administration reported that, in addition, about ten to fifteen inmates per month are transferred to higher-security facilities because of disciplinary problems, and that these inmates usually are not in segregation longer than a week before being transferred.

Several inmates that JHA spoke with reported they had been in segregation for more than two weeks awaiting transfer to another facility. One inmate reported that five weeks was the typical amount of time to spend in segregation before transfer after refusing housing. Responding to JHA's report, however, the administration reiterated that, barring unusual circumstances, inmates are not held in segregation longer than two weeks before being transferred to another facility.

Inmates in segregation are permitted a one-hour "no contact" visit each month through a partition screen. Only verbal and visual contact is permitted. At the time of JHA's visit, segregation inmates were only permitted one shower and one hour of outside recreation time each week, the minimum allowable by administrative regulation.<sup>6</sup>

JHA found this practice exceedingly punitive, given that the Vandalia is a minimum security facility, and most medium and maximum security facilities that JHA has visited provide segregation inmates with greater out-of-cell time than the bare regulatory minimum. JHA inferred from this practice that conditions in segregation were being kept severe in order to discourage inmates from refusing housing in the dorms, lest there be a flood of inmates refusing housing.

Since the time of JHA's visit, however, the administration has effectively reconfigured its segregation policy and doubled the amount of out-of-cell recreation time allotted to segregation inmates from one hour per week to two hours per week. The administration is to be greatly commended for this. Small changes, such as increased out-of-cell time, can greatly improve the quality of life for inmates and their general well-being. As part of the administration's ongoing goal to improve the quality of life for Vandalia's inmates, JHA

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<sup>6</sup> See Ill. Admin. Code title 20, sections 504.620 and 504.670.

recommends that the administration seek to expand on these changes with the aim of providing segregation inmates with three showers and five hours of outside recreation time per week.

The inmates that JHA spoke with in segregation for refusing housing reported that even though conditions in segregation were harsh, they were still better than the dorms, which the inmates variously described as “gross,” “horrible,” “disgusting,” and “the worst.” These inmates indicated that they would rather endure harsh conditions in segregation and be transferred to a high security facility, so long as they did not have to live under the conditions in the dorms anymore.

Many inmates, both in segregation and in the general population dorms, seemed exasperated and dejected at being unable to access any rehabilitative programs, such as vocational classes, anger management classes, parenting classes, or continuing education. The most distressing example of this was an inmate that JHA spoke with on suicide watch in segregation. He explained that while he was feeling better and no longer wanted to kill himself, he reached the end of his rope a few days before and lost hope. He relayed that he was getting out fairly soon, but had realized that with no education, no job, no skills, he did not see how he was supposed to turn it all around and make a happy, decent life. The inmate indicated that he had wanted to take classes to further his education, but had not been able to do so because of long waitlists.

Responding to JHA’s report, the administration indicated that it was in the process of implementing increased educational and lifestyle redirection programs for inmates.

### **Education, Industries, Clinical Services & Vocational Programming**

The administration expressed a strong desire to provide greater rehabilitative services, industry jobs, and educational and vocational programming to inmates. However, the practical reality is that the administration has been overburdened with lack of sufficient resources and funding. An exceptionally large number of inmates that JHA spoke with indicated that they strongly desired to attend school, parenting classes, anger management classes, to obtain a job in industries, or to obtain vocational training and trade skills, but could not because Vandalia offers few programs and its waitlists are extremely long. In visiting inmates in the general population dormitories, JHA was stuck by the number of inmates that were present, idle, and lacking work or educational assignments.

Given that Vandalia is a minimum security facility, it seems ideally situated to utilize volunteers to teach classes such as literacy, job strategies, and life skills. Currently, volunteers at Vandalia are only used to assist in religious programming. The administration reported that approximately 1063 inmates have some form of assignment (i.e. work in industries, school, vocational classes, etc.), and 690 inmates are unassigned.

Responding to JHA's report, the administration indicated that it has proposed, and is currently implementing, a programming expansion plan that will include providing fatherhood classes, lifestyle redirection classes, and greater work opportunities for inmates.

### **Education**

At the time of JHA's visit, Vandalia offered 14 Adult Basic Education classes, in which a total of 135 inmates were enrolled, and 180 inmates were on the waitlist; and five GED classes in which 85 inmates were enrolled and 55 were on the wait list. In addition, 15 inmates were enrolled in a career technologies class; and 100 were enrolled in night college classes. The career technologies class was available only to inmates with six months or less left on their sentences. Inmates in school attend class for two hours each day and are also instructed to study and work on assignments in the dorms. However, given the loud, crowded, and chaotic atmosphere in the dorms, it's doubtful that any inmate could do so.

Several JHA volunteers visited a pre-GED class, designed for inmates with a 6th to 8th grade education or sometimes less. Inmates in the class work at their own pace and receive individual teaching assistance on their class work on request. There is no teaching or instruction of the class as whole.

Inmates that JHA spoke with in the class indicated that they enjoyed school and were happy to be in a class, but wished there were more classes available to them like anger management, parenting, and job skills. One inmate that JHA spoke with in the class was in extreme duress and nearly burst into tears speaking about his situation. He explained that he had tried, but was unable to get into anger management, parenting and drug treatment classes at Vandalia. As these classes had been court ordered, he was very worried that this would negatively affect his parental custody rights.

The overwhelming input JHA received from inmates, both in and out of school, was a strong desire for more education, vocational training, and instruction in self-betterment. This contrasted strongly with the opinion expressed to JHA by one teacher, who said that most inmates did not care and were just there for a "good time."

The administration indicated that it would like to double the number of Adult Basic Education classes. The administration further reported that, since the time of JHA's visit, 19 additional spaces in pre-GED classes had opened up to inmates.

### **Industries**

Although farming industries once dominated Vandalia, they gradually have been eliminated over the years. Today, 25 inmates are employed in the pasteurization plant and 28 inmates are employed in meat processing. Inmates working in the pasteurizer earn \$1.00 an hour and those working in meat processing earn \$1.50 an hour. JHA visited the

meat processing plant between work shifts, and it appeared very clean and well-organized. Six inmates are also employed in the farm operations office and, under a new program, 10 to 12 inmates are being employed to package cooking oil.

JHA had the opportunity to speak with the superintendent of the industries program. He was extremely knowledgeable, energetic and inspiring regarding the program and its rehabilitative value. He reported that recidivism rates for inmates working in industries are extremely low because inmates who are given responsibility, taught job skills and learn good work habits 'simply do better' when they are released into the community. To illustrate, the Superintendent told the story of a former inmate who worked in Vandalia's pasteurization plant and obtained a job on a 300-cow dairy farm when he was released. When the owner of the farm became disabled, the former inmate was able to assume management of the farm's entire operation because of his prior training in Vandalia's industries.

Inmates convicted of certain violent or domestic abuse crimes are not eligible to work in industries. Most inmates who work industries are scheduled to be released within three years. Contingent upon funding, the superintendent hoped to create 10 to 15 new jobs for inmates by obtaining a cereal machine. If funding were available, he would welcome the opportunity to create more jobs for inmates by expanding Vandalia's industries.

### **Clinical Services & Vocational Programming**

The clinical services department has eight counselors, one casework supervisor and one re-entry coordinator. Apart from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and a twelve-week drug education program, Vandalia does not offer formal substance abuse treatment to inmates. A twelve-week "Track 1" life skills program, which includes an anger management class, is also offered. According to inmates, it is difficult to get into this program because there are few available spaces.

With respect to vocational training, Vandalia offers programs in building trades, auto body work, and horticulture. A total of 45 inmates are collectively enrolled in these, with 15 inmates enrolled in each separate program.

The administration was optimistic and enthusiastic about providing inmates with more programming and services in the future. Specifically, the administration indicated that the recent hiring of new staff, including a clinical supervisor, a caseworker supervisor, and a new Chaplain to help coordinate religious volunteers, would help in accomplishing this goal. The administration further indicated that as part of its programming expansion plan, it intends to increase the availability of self-betterment programs, such as fatherhood and lifestyle redirection programs.

## **Physical and Mental Health**

Vandalia has a nine-bed infirmary, which included one isolation bed for contagious patients. On the date of JHA's visit, the infirmary was full and the waiting room was crowded with about 20 inmates waiting to be seen. One terminally-ill patient with prostate cancer was permanently housed in the infirmary. He was clearly in pain and had difficulty breathing when he spoke with JHA, but indicated that he had just been given pain medication so he would be feeling better soon. He praised the staff and the Warden in particular for being extremely caring and supportive, and commended Vandalia's new chaplain for being very kind and compassionate towards all the inmates. Subsequent to JHA's visit, JHA was happy to learn from the administration that this inmate's sentence was commuted and he was released.

Vandalia is authorized for eleven full-time nurses (40 hours per week), and was fully staffed on the date of JHA's visit. Nursing coverage is provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Generally, if an inmate submits a request for medical treatment, he is seen the next day. If an inmate puts in a non-urgent request for medical treatment on a Friday, however, he usually will not be seen until Monday. Sick call is performed daily, and staff reported they treat about 15 to 20 inmates per day. Medical staff members indicated they commonly use an English-Spanish translation book to communicate with Spanish-speaking patients. Staff did not indicate whether there is a Spanish-speaker on staff designated and/or used to assist in translating. Medical records are handled by part-time clerks.

A physician, a dental hygienist, and a dentist also are all employed full-time, each at 40 hours per week. In addition, Vandalia employs an optometrist for four hours per week, and a radiology technician for three hours per week. There was approximately a three-month backlog and waitlist for inmates to see the dentist to have teeth extracted.

Under the medical unit's policies, if an inmate seeks treatment for the same ongoing medical complaint three times in 30 days, he is automatically referred to the physician. Inmates are charged a \$2 co-payment for each medical appointment. This co-payment does not apply to scheduled follow-up visits, medical visits made pursuant to a physician referral, or visits to treat ongoing, chronic illness.

However, inmates who seek a second appointment because their symptoms were not resolved by their initial treatment must pay another \$2 co-payment. As noted in prior JHA reports, this policy, which applies in other facilities as well, is totally unsound in that it unfairly penalizes inmates with an additional charge where the reason for their return medical visit is misdiagnosis or ineffectual treatment. The passage of House Bill 1929, currently pending before the governor, will only worsen the situation and create even greater barriers to inmates' access to health care by more than doubling the co-payment amount from \$2 to \$5.

With respect to mental health, as stated previously, the first two cells in the segregation unit are designated as mental health/suicide watch cells. At the time of JHA's visit, 163 inmates were receiving psychiatric care, and, of those, 141 inmates were receiving psychotropic medication. Staff reported that the most common psychiatric condition among inmates at Vandalia is bipolar disorder. Inmates come to the health care unit daily to receive psychotropic medications, and staff members specifically monitor the inmates to ensure they actually take their medications. The only group-based mental health therapy offered is an anger management class.

Vandalia is authorized and staffed with one full-time psychologist (40 hours per week) and two part-time psychiatrists (each six and one-half hours per week). In total, the two psychiatrists are present at the facility a total of four days per month. Vandalia's psychologist is burdened with a heavy caseload, but admirably tries to visit every inmate-patient in the dorms at least once a week. If an inmate needs privacy, the psychologist will also accommodate this by seeing the inmate in an office. This is a wise practice, in that lack of confidentiality and privacy can seriously compromise the ability of caregivers to provide treatment in prison settings.

Inmates at Vandalia can make an appointment to see the psychologist by filling out a request slip. Staff indicated that because Vandalia does not have the capacity or resources to treat inmates with acute psychiatric problems, these inmates generally are transferred to Dixon Correctional Center for treatment. One mental health staff member expressed to JHA that it can be difficult to meet the mental health needs of Vandalia's population at current staffing levels, and that hiring additional staff would help to provide greater mental health services to the population.

### **Population Demographics**

The average age of inmate at Vandalia is 34. The average length of stay is seven months, 15 days. Approximately 31 percent of the population is incarcerated for Class 2 offenses; 25 percent for Class 4 offenses; 19 percent for Class 1 offenses; 14 percent for Class 3 offenses; 11 percent for Class X offenses; and 5 percent for Class 4 offenses. No inmates are incarcerated for murder.

Approximately 50 percent of the population was convicted in Cook County. The racial-ethnic makeup of Vandalia's population is roughly 61 percent African-American; 28 percent White; 10 percent Hispanic; less than one percent Asian; and less than one percent other, unspecified ethnicity.

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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.