
**JHA COVID-19 Prison
Survey Comment
Report**



Perceptions and Experiences from People inside Prison during the Pandemic

Section: Communications

Overview

JHA's COVID-19 Prison Survey Comment Report presents information from comments shared in response to [JHA's COVID-19 survey](#), contextualized with survey data and other information. This survey was responded to by 16,351 people incarcerated in IDOC in late April and early May 2020.

This section of the report summarizes people's comments regarding communications, and contains the following subsections:

- Phones
- "Free" Calls
- Disciplinary Restrictions
- Restitution
- Video Visits
- Tablets & Email
- Mail

This is one of 12 sections reflecting the comments JHA received from people in prisons; the report's Executive Summary and all other sections can be found on our website www.thejha.org.



Communications

Everyone is worried, scared, and depressed. More communication with the outside world is needed. – Western

Approx. 5 weeks ago we locked down for weeks, no shower, phone, didn't know family, kids, mom etc. were ok. – Graham

JHA detailed some pre-existing issues with communications, including issues with phone demand exceeding supply and lack of access, in our [2019 Communications report](#). Of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, 60% of people disagreed that they had enough access to phones. While some practices have changed since then, many of the issues with access to communications were known prior to the pandemic and made worse by lockdowns. People wanted more phone access because of the pandemic and in-person visitation restriction. Some reported issues still with getting approvals processed for phone and video visits. Inability to contact family during this crisis made the situation worse for many.

In [JHA's April 8, 2020 recommendations](#), we advised that IDOC should allow everyone access to communications while conforming with official COVID-19 prevention guidelines (e.g. pertaining to social distancing and cleaning). In addition, we recommended that IDOC should devote staff to ensuring prompt review and approval of messaging and video visitors, email and mail, and phone list approval and purging to improve communications during this time when in-person visitation is not allowed.

Some people expressed additional, predictable difficulties with getting access to communications during the pandemic, including people who typically are denied such “privileges” due to grade restrictions or segregation status; those with hearing impairments who rely on hearing-assistive technology (which is often located in a separate area, so restrictions on movement prevent people from accessing equipment); and people whose loved ones live in foreign countries where ensuring calling and video visitation privileges may have been more difficult.

In our prior recommendations, JHA also stated that IDOC should make public information about problems and barriers it experiences with tech vendors’ services and the functionality and utility of vendor GTL’s tablets, kiosks, video visits, and other products. Further, we encouraged IDOC to consider a state loan program for GTL tablets so that more people can have access to these devices regardless of wealth and in case of medical isolation, while ensuring Wi-Fi functionality. We also recommend that IDOC make public technology vendor work order information to show that IDOC has identified and is working to address known issues. Despite many issues with existing technology, many people commented that they wanted greater access to tablets and apps that allow for expanded access to information and communications, e.g. law library, phone, video visit, etc.

Additionally, JHA believes there were communication failures and lack of adequate information was provided to people regarding “free” communications offered by both IDOC and GTL. Many people commented on their inability to benefit from these and their related frustration.

GTL has stated on tablet that as of 3/20 the first video visit of every week is free for up to twelve weeks but my family has been paying for them all. Also GTL has done nothing to improve service or quality of product. We rely on these devices but most of the time you can't get in it. Your subscription continues to keep running for a device you cannot use. GTL has stated on numerous times that they don't guarantee in cell coverage. The WIFI is outside my door. If they knew this why install faulty equipment and IDOC is aware of it and does nothing. I have complained and complained. I feel like a victim of a scam. Could they not install a WIFI booster? When you put up WIFI isn't it supposed to cover a range of area? – Kewanee

Increasingly during the pandemic, we hear lack of access to communications is causing more serious issues such as people declaring hunger strikes. Information about such things, along with other operational indicators, is now publicly available in the [Operations and Management Reports](#) on the IDOC website.

Other jurisdictions seem to have made more of an effort to ensure open communications during the pandemic. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has represented it will provide 12 free write-outs a month for people to send letters, has utilized free video visitation via Zoom and will continue to offer this service on a new platform, and provides five free weekly emails and phone calls, as well as free cable. In IDOC, JHA has not heard of any free write-outs, though we recommended this be provided. Free video visitation via GTL has been problematic. While possibly two free weekly emails are being provided by GTL, free calls have been problematic as discussed herein. Also, prisoners must pay for cable.



PHONES

The most mentally challenging thing is that we only get to use the phone once every 3 days. Talking to our loved ones is how most of us cope. – Hill

We should get to use the phone every day to check on our family, my daughter. People are dying out there daily. We never know when it can be our last time talking to them. – Sheridan

We did not receive yard or a phone call in 37 days. This truly makes life hard here we don't even get phone calls like we should they don't care about us or our families. – Graham (likely R&C)

For me, it was in person visits, but those are suspended. I am really not good at using the internet kiosk device and can't afford a tablet. So, I am totally cut off from my lifelines and feel like ending my life because I am scared and worried about my family. They can't visit me. And counselors here do not let us make direct free phone calls home to get in touch with family. – Western

There were many concerns about lack of access to phones in JHA's COVID-19 survey comments and people naturally expressed that ability to communicate with loved ones on the outside was particularly important to them during these frightening and uncertain times.

Some people reported that no phone calls were allowed during the first week or weeks of quarantine. At Sheridan people reported that during the first two weeks of lockdown they had no phone access and some people reported they had to go on hunger strike to gain access. Some people in medical quarantine and isolation reported not getting access to phone calls. Again, JHA recommends that IDOC make guidelines for privileges during various pandemic statuses or levels of lockdown explicit and publicly available. There were also some reports of staff restricting communication access as retaliation. Without knowing what guidelines govern communication restrictions, it is impossible to tell if restrictions are being imposed rationally and fairly or arbitrarily, based on personal animus.

There are inmates here that have death in their immediate family and were not allowed to call them when asking the official's on duty. – Graham

Several people reported being denied calls by counselors to check in with families under special circumstances, including where an immediate relative died. As is usual, JHA received many reports of counselors being inaccessible.

According to the memo Springfield sent us we are entitled to one 20-minute phone call and showers. A lot of the staff have been extremely disrespectful screaming and yelling at us to get off the phone when we haven't had our full 20 minutes. Sometimes the person would be on the phone 10 minutes and the COs are threatening us to give us tickets. We talked to the Warden and nothing has happened. – Decatur

There are only 4 phones but ten inmates which means there is always going to be someone that can't use the phone because a half hour is not enough time for ten inmates to use the phone. – Dixon

People continued to report during the pandemic that fights were caused because of insufficient phone access and having concerns about certain individuals controlling the phones, denying others access. People reported varying phone access, but at several facilities people reported limited dayrooms of 1 hour or 30 minutes were not enough time for everyone to use the phones. At Sheridan some people reported there were six phones for 38 people to use over an hour (which would allow at maximum for 18 people to use the phones with 20-minute calls), and that this lack of access was causing fights. At Vienna someone wrote that there were not enough phones, with only three phones for 48 people. Many people in housing with dayrooms reported that showers and phones ran at the same time and they had to choose between cleaning themselves and speaking with loved ones. There were also some reports of porters or gangs controlling or charging for phone time.

Phones are hard to use. The same people in dorm [X] keep using the phone over and over and use other PIN #s for multiple calls. Why can't I call my family, because I'm not in a gang! – East Moline

The phones are ran by the gangs so I don't even try to get into that. If someone uses too much time, a fight happens. – Vandalia

Security staff overlook monopolizing off phone usage by security threat groups. These could easily be identified by auditing phone usage records. We should not have to risk health and safety to access communication to our family and friends. – Vienna

Inmates using multiple PIN numbers to stay on phones longer than their 20-minute time limit. – Danville

The [phones are] very close to each other with nothing between people overhear each other's phone conversations not to mention it is extremely hard to hear with all the background noise. And also it is very difficult at times to use the phone because inmates let their buddies use each other's PIN#s (code to dial out on the phone) and use the phone for back to back calls. – Graham

They're letting 1 person at a time use the phone and shower. At that rate, nobody will be able to call home. – Lincoln

They don't make sure everyone gets on the phone once. Some get several calls while others go days without, especially dietary workers. – Logan

Our biggest issue here is the lack of access to phones. This issue existed before COVID-19. In our building, the phones make it to us once per week for 20 mins. This causes frustrations which leads to the majority of the violent fights around here. – Menard

People are sitting in line for hours hoping for a call. While others are making 6 to 8 calls a day. – Taylorville

At some facilities pandemic practices appear to have actually increased phone access because fewer people are being allowed out of cells to use the limited number of phones at one time. Interestingly the facilities where the largest percentages of respondents reported they did have a free call in the prior week were male medium-security celled facilities Pinckneyville (40.6%, 279) and Western (31.4%, 226). In responses to earlier JHA surveys which asked a different question

of whether people had enough access to phones, only 21% (259) of 2017 Pinckneyville survey respondents and 21.6% (143) of 2019 Western survey respondents reported they did. In discussing facility survey feedback with JHA staff, Western administrators reported that call volume from the facility has increased almost three-fold during the pandemic. JHA encourages IDOC to share such information to demonstrate their efforts to facilitate communications during the pandemic and the results of these efforts.

The male facilities with the highest percentage of people who reported in COVID-19 surveys that they did not receive a free call in the prior week were all minimum-security dorm environments: Vandalia (78%, 252), Southwestern (75.5%, 244), Jacksonville (74%, 419), Lincoln (68.5%, 263), and Vienna (68.2%, 253). Logan, which is a mixed-security female facility and mostly dorm housing, had the fourth highest rate of people reporting lack of free calls, with 69% or 660 people.

Phones are breaking and not being repaired. – Centralia

There were some specific reports of areas where phones were not functioning. These issues were raised by JHA with administrators at some facilities and a few people reported the issues were addressed. Again, JHA recommends that IDOC make vendor work orders public so people know when IDOC is aware of and actively working to get problems addressed.

Some people commented that they did not have access to the phone to call the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) hotline. Access to phones to make PREA reports should be permitted, although people should still be able to make reports in writing or through any staff member.

Every day we put our life at risk when we call our loved ones from a phone that is being used by over 80+ different inmates. – Lawrence

They have 3 phones about a foot and a half from each other and they have guys using all 3 at the same time. – Hill

The phone issue is we touch it every time someone's done and have to pass it bar to cell bar every day! And some don't want to pass it! Arguments happen, people are bothered and it's a vehicle for transmission! Then if no one passes it we then have to pull the long cord by hand. Very dirty! Germs! – Stateville

As discussed in the “Cleaning” section of this report, there were many concerns regarding lack of phone cleaning and sanitation, e.g. from Pontiac “no one is wiping down the phones between use, and inmates have to drag the phone by the cord down the gallery, because officers either don't want to touch the phone or refuse to come on the gallery to pass it.” Someone described the lack of phone cleanliness by stating the phones “smell like bad breath.” Several people expressed concerns about phones as a potential source of virus spread, both through shared use and lack of cleaning and where phones physically are located close together, not allowing for recommended social distancing. Where access is not strictly regulated by scheduling, at some facilities there seemed to be a free for all of people crowding to use the phones during the limited times of access. Some correctional facilities in other jurisdictions have erected Plexiglas dividers to provide some protective separation and better social distancing. However, JHA was informed by staff that Plexiglas is in short supply and extremely difficult to order.

If my tablet phone app was activated, I would rather not touch the public phone, and have unlimited access. There are only 4 phones to use between 100 inmates and there have been serious problems. – Graham

Many people wrote that they wanted phone access on tablets, in part due to cleanliness concerns and feeling that shared phones could be a disease vector. People at Pontiac wrote, "*That would be great, and would stop a lot of fights, segregation and inmates breaking phones out of frustration;*" "*By putting phones on the tablet you can cut down on people getting sick and fights;*" and "*staying in touch with our families during this pandemic is crucial to safety and our mental health, if COVID-19 becomes more present and starts spreading within using the phones in dayroom would be risky.*"

Some workers reported difficulty getting phone access because of their work shifts conflicting with times they were supposed to have access and their work schedules not being considered.

Additionally, some people reported that they could not buy phone minutes on commissary, either because of limited access or other issues.

The problem is that most of us can't call our families due to our phone list not being activated. I put in my phone list in February, and my phone numbers still aren't on, so I can't call my family. – Menard

It may take 2 weeks just to get the [phone approval] list from the counselor to submit, then another month before I'm able to call the person/number. I've already lost a family member due to COVID-19 and I haven't been able to call prior to her death because of the extremely slow phone system at Pinckneyville. This issue seriously needs to be addressed. – Pinckneyville

It is taking months to get phone #s added to our call lists. When phone calls are our only source of contact with family. I've been waiting 2 months. – Taylorville

Huge issue with security getting people's numbers approved. People unable to communicate with families for months! 3+ – Vandalia

I have been trying for the last 3 months to make phone calls to my family and friends, I have not been able to for nearly a year, no one has been able to add new numbers or delete old numbers from their phone list. – Illinois River

New inmates have no access to phones unless it is grievanced, or until it is approved, which takes 30 days (which is a concern while this pandemic is or was spreading rapidly.) – Shawnee

I have been in IDOC since [2019] and they still to date 4-24-2020 have not returned my phone list. Also it takes over 3 months to get a pin number. Still no contact with anyone. I have no tickets and I am on A-grade. – Shawnee

Some people continued to report issues with not getting phone approvals and others wrote about how phone lists or numbers got erased due to "technical difficulties." Some people believed they could only get new numbers added every 90 days, which is not the policy. Some people felt that staff were not assisting them with such issues to facilitate outside connections; some wrote this made people feel desperate and want to self-harm. IDOC and phone vendor Securus appeared to again be pointing fingers at one another for ongoing issues with providing acceptable services.

JHA also received reports that some people had blocks on certain phone numbers, e.g. someone reported he had his mom's number blocked by IDOC because he called her using someone else's Personal Identification Number because he had a disciplinary phone restriction preventing him calling otherwise, and it was unclear how this could be reviewed or appealed. All such disciplinary measures must be knowable, uniform, and subject to due process. Use of blocks was concerning during a period when other disciplinary restrictions on communications were intended to be waived, as discussed further below. Such restrictions are generally opposed by JHA as they are largely overly restrictive and counterproductive.

People also wrote about how it was difficult to connect with people by phone not knowing when they might get access to phones.

They run the phones however they want to. Sometimes we get it, sometimes we don't.
– Pinckneyville

Sometimes more than not phone calls don't line up with families' work schedule.
– Graham

To our understanding there is to be one person in the shower and one on the phone. There are at least 100 women on each unit and no consistency from officer to officer which causes panic. ... if we could have a system in place that we would all know at approximately x time each day, give or take an hour, this room will shower and at y time each day this room will use the phone, we could be better prepared to 'plan' our day, in our rooms accordingly. I know a large number of us are trying to still work out and keep some sense of normalcy to our lives to help keep us sane during this pandemic. – Decatur

Some people wrote that their limited time for phone use was further disrupted.

Our calls are interrupted by med lines, and we are timed-out for more than 30 minutes before we can call again. Since we only get 20 minutes for a call, every second counts with limited dayroom times. – Decatur

There were unreported violent incidents over the phones. There were no COs monitoring the dayrooms at the time. The phone situation has been an ongoing and frequent issue here at Hill C.C. for years... Now Hill C.C. is only letting out 2-3 cells at a time to use the phones and showers, so they did correct their mistakes after a couple of weeks. – Hill

Several administrators provided some additional information in response to concerns raised in JHA's COVID-19 facility survey feedback. For example, Hill administrators responded that access would vary based on level of lockdown or quarantine and that they continually reworked schedules to allow for more out-of-cell time while maintaining appropriate social distancing and to allow for ample time to clean, e.g. access was more restricted during the initial Level 1 lockdown from April 9th until May 13th when the pandemic first took hold and that at the time of their response general population was offered out-of-cell time and phone access daily.

People in Administrative Detention (AD) wrote about limitations on phone calls as well as other issues, e.g. still being limited to four phone calls per month for 15 minutes. If AD is a non-disciplinary status and "non-punitive," we again ask question the fairness of these communications restrictions when calls in general population can be 20 minutes, frequency of

calls is typically determined just by grade, and all calls are monitored, which effectively addresses security concerns. Communications should not be limited without specific justification. Other people in AD at different facilities reported they had been requesting additional phone and video visits privileges be given under the circumstances, as they normally would be permitted in-person visits, but these were suspended due to the pandemic.

I'm in receiving because I'm on transfer and they only give us the phone once a week for 10 minutes. – Shawnee

People in segregation, intake or reception status also reported additional issues with getting phone access at some facilities. For example, at Stateville, people reported that phone privileges were initiated at first, but then taken away from people in segregation and that people started fires and went on hunger strike to get them back, but phone access became more limited. As one person commented, *"We need to receive the phones in segregation more. We are allowed 4 calls a month 2 before the 15th 2 after. This is not good. We cannot speak with family to check on them."*



“FREE” CALLS

They do not give free phone calls here. – Shawnee

In April, we were given a one-time \$4.15 increase in state pay and we were told to use this to buy phone minutes and pre-stamped envelopes to stay in contact with our families. Whether this money came from the State or GTL, we do not know. – Shawnee

IDOC publicly stated that it would provide everyone in custody two free phone calls and a free video visit, and this was reportedly accomplished by putting funds on people's trust fund accounts. According to IDOC's published FAQs, "Is the Department offering enhanced communication services? The Department is providing all people in custody with funds for two 20-minute phone calls and one 15-minute video visit. In addition, GTL is providing all individuals with one free 15-minute video visit per week, for 12 weeks, beginning March 20, 2020." In response to [JHA's April 30th Communication Bulletin](#) IDOC reaffirmed the information from its website and, in subsequent communications, IDOC administrators represented to JHA that calls/ video visits happened weekly. Assuming this is the case, at a cost of **\$4.15/week per person for these services, with minimally 32,000 people incarcerated, over 12 weeks this would amount to more than \$1.5 million** transferred from IDOC funds to prisoner trust fund accounts to be spent on vendor GTL (emails, tablets, video visitation) and Securus (phone) products. However, we have seen little evidence suggesting that people actually received communication funds more than once, or knew about this occurring in facilities, and many people reported difficulty accessing the supposedly free communications.

JHA believes it was IDOC leaderships' intention that everyone in IDOC would receive these calls and video visits as in-person visitation is not occurring and contact with people on the outside is essential. However, in survey responses **61.7% of survey respondents reported they had not received a free phone call** in the last week (the survey time frame was within the 12 week period IDOC indicated money for phone calls would be provided), while 27.7% reported they had, but 4.7% of people reported the call cut off early. There were several comments about calls cutting

out; for example, someone at Pontiac commented, "Even if call is mistakenly disconnected at 1 or 2 mins in, it counts as a whole call."

In comments many people reported they had never heard about free calls and sensibly pointed out that they might not know if their family had paid for a call or the call was free. People commented in survey responses asking JHA how free calls were supposed to work. We believe that information about "free" calls was not communicated clearly to the population and people may not have noticed the added funds on their trust fund accounts or spent them on other things during their limited commissary opportunities. Some people reported because they did not have full commissary access, they could not spend the one-time funds they did receive on phone minutes. We requested multiple times that IDOC provide us with any memos that were given to the population about the free communications but to date we have not received any articulation or documentation of how IDOC shared this information inside prisons.

In other jurisdictions correctional entities have negotiated with vendors to directly provide free services. While GTL provided some free services, (which also had issues, as discussed below), phone vendor Securus did not appear to have provided any pandemic concessions. Illinois' phone rates due to prior legislative efforts are now comparatively low, at about one cent per minute. Yet, people still commented in JHA surveys that they had no funds for phone calls and were denied wellness check calls to their families.



DISCIPLINARY RESTRICTIONS

C-B only allow to us the phone once a week and it's not for free, the Warden say we suppose to use the phone as A grade inmate, but IA say no. – Graham

I've been unable to utilize the phone because I'm on C-grade, but the memo says we're allowed 4 phone calls monthly. – Pinckneyville

They say C-grade gets 4 phone calls a month and not giving it. – Danville

The tv says if we are on C-grade or B-grade that we will receive 2 free phone calls a week and nobody has received that free call. I brought it to the COs attention and they said it's not going to work if I'm calling a cell phone and they can't do anything about it. – Shawnee

I get 2 calls a month!! I have a family member with COVID-19! I told staff and they told me 'write a letter' so I used another inmates pin# and they gave me C-grade for two months for it!! – Graham

Anyone on B or C grade they are only limited 4 total calls regardless if phone issues occur or not. In a time like this when inmates worry about family and sickness – I think this is a little unjust. – Illinois River

Ordinary, people who have been restricted to C grade status do not receive any phone calls under [administrative law](#), while those in B grade receive only two calls a month. [JHA continues to oppose these restrictions](#). However, thankfully IDOC reportedly waived these restrictions during the

pandemic. IDOC reiterated this position in their **response** to our initial survey result report by sharing an email to all facilities stating, “additional opportunities shall be afforded to all offenders to make phone calls. ... Offenders in “C” grade will be allowed to make one (1) phone call per week until visits are restored.”

Nonetheless, at the time surveys were completed, many people reported that there were still blocks in the vendor Securus’ phone system at their facility that were preventing them making calls due to such disciplinary restrictions that were supposed to be waived. One administrator stated that the vendor Securus’ system was only allowing people in B grade two calls a week and people on C grade one call a week, not a block placed by IDOC, but this was unclear. People in segregation status also repeatedly raised that they had not had access to free calls in various prisons.

People like me on C grade only get one call a month. ... I have 2 kids and can't talk to them to see if they are okay. ... I understand I'm on C grade and lost some privilege but now on this lockdown I can't leave my cell. I don't have the programs that kept me calm. – Pontiac

My sister is recovering from cancer treatment and recently I was informed that her whole family tested positive for COVID-19. I ain't able to reach out to them cuz they got me on telephone restrictions (limited phone calls) I've tried and still trying to get counselors and mental health and the Warden to lift this restriction so I can check on my sister and her family. But unfortunately, they all tell me no. And that they cannot help with it. Now I'm losing my sleep. I got a lot of anxiety, getting depressed because I don't know how my sister and her family doing. I'm only given 2 calls per month. – Pontiac

I haven't been able to speak with my loved ones for almost two weeks because I'm on B grade and limited to 2 calls a month. Knowing that my family and baby daughter is doing good helps me deal with these hard times and it's stressful when I don't. – Hill

B-Grade offenders are not getting phone calls as applied. And when brought to IDOC staff attention they say, "I don't work for Securus." It's as if no one cares about this problem and isn't trying to rectify it. – Lawrence

B and C grade only get 2 phone calls per month, even now in this pandemic. My grandmother passed away because of COVID-19, and I didn't know because I had to wait a month to make my 2 phone calls. – Menard

JHA has followed up with administrators where we hear these concerns and continue to oppose this communication restriction. IDOC officials have stated that there were some cases where restrictions were not lifted in the timely manner they intended. Hill administrators responded to our facility follow up concerns regarding grade restrictions and phones that everyone should be able to use the phone and that if someone experienced difficulty making calls it was more than likely due to a phone list issue, mainly data entry issues with phone lists, or system error, which is handled by vendor Securus. They advised that issues should be reported to counselors to rectify the problem. JHA commonly hears of people having difficulty accessing counselors, which seems to have been made worse during the pandemic, and of counselors’ having unreasonable caseloads. Again, expectations for phone access need to be made clear and uniform, communicated to the population, and implemented with fidelity and consistency. Additionally, IDOC needs to develop better vendor relationships so issues can be more quickly remedied.

People also shared concerns regarding excessive use of grade restrictions and lengthy grade restrictions being used as sanctions.

They put a lot of people on C-grade and they can't use the phone at all and that shouldn't be happening because we need to be in contact with our families during this crisis. – Jacksonville

Shawnee staff are writing us tickets for nothing just to put us on C-grade so we can't use the phone to talk to our kids and loved ones. – Shawnee

[Please help] abolish excessive C and B grade. IDOC writes so many bogus tickets to keep inmates from using the phone, video visit, and going to commissary. I can say from me alone I don't get my privileges back [until later this year for a ticket from 2 years ago]. – Pinckneyville

JHA hears regularly and has confirmed the factual basis that there are many people with excessive grade restrictions, and believes that people should be afforded opportunity for grade restriction cuts for good behavior. Grade restoration based on good behavior should also be made automatic; often people are not able to effectively or proactively self-advocate putting them at a disadvantage for getting available benefits which is contrary to the principle of a cut in grade restrictions due to improved conduct. Of the 12,780 people who responded to [prior JHA surveys](#) at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, only 9% of people agreed that IDOC's disciplinary process was fair. Without a sense of procedural justice within the system, sanctions are unlikely to be effective. Moreover, communication sanctions unfairly punish families and do harm in fostering family connection and support which are important to reentry success.



RESTITUTION

Some people reported that they had restitution debt and were not given funds for communications from IDOC, as described above, although the [communication to wardens](#) states that the funds put on accounts were “net of any court ordered fee(s), restitution(s), or beginning negative balance.”

I've been in debt with IDOC \$5 for lost ID, so when I was offered money for free phone calls, I still couldn't contact my people because the money that was given was taken ASAP. I want to contact my people because I haven't heard from them in months. – Pontiac

Other people commented that they were indigent or had substantial debt for legal copies and postage, such that the funds provided by IDOC for free phone calls and a video visit were appropriated for restitution.

Unlike disciplinary restrictions, institutional debts to permit communications during the pandemic were not waived. JHA believes everyone should have access to communications while in-person visitation is restricted. Additionally, [JHA believes](#) there should be mechanisms to get restitution

reviewed, as some individuals have debt that they will never be able to repay. While excessive segregation and grade restrictions may now be reviewed, there is not a set mechanism to review and discharge IDOC debt, some of which may have been incurred far in the past or for destruction of property caused by a person suffering serious mental illness. However, IDOC does not have authority to modify other fees, such as court-imposed fees.¹



VIDEO VISITS

We do not get access throughout the week to get any video visits. We have been complaining about this, some inmates took their trays and refuse to give them back because of not getting these visits. People are dying because of this and by denying us this we will not be able to see some of our family if they catch it or we catch it. [X] cell house in Pontiac are being denied rights to visits. Visits help relieve the stress not only for us but for our family and now inmates have been dying in Stateville so what if we catch it and our family never gets to see us again? We expressed this to the Warden and they said deal with it. – Pontiac

I was told I would get a free visit, but when my family tried to set up an account they were unable to—whether they wanted the free visit or were willing to pay they could not set up the account. I’m told they can’t use a iPhone and the ones that have an Android are unable to complete the forms necessary to visit me. – Shawnee

In addition to IDOC providing a free video visit via a trust fund credit, vendor GTL reportedly had provided a weekly free 15-minute video visit for 12 weeks (in addition to some free messages and games). A memo to the population from GTL about this was published. Yet, in [survey responses](#), **57.5% of respondents reported they did not get a free video visit in the prior week, only 8.6% of people (1,327) said they had a functional video visit**, while **14.4% reported they had a visit but with bad service/functionality**. Again, people reported not being informed about how to use the free video visits. JHA requested, but was not provided with, memos to the population

¹ Hill administrators responded to JHA’s inquiry regarding restitution for court fees reportedly inhibiting someone’s ability to shop and get free phone calls: “The payment of Court fees is processed according to the 2016 United States Supreme Court case, *Bruce v. Samuels* [577 U.S. ____ (2016)]. The Business Office forwards *in forma pauperis* payments to the courts per the decision of the 7th Circuit’s procedure as follows: When an offender has \$10 in his or her trust fund, the institution is to forward 20% of any additional money coming into the offender’s trust fund. The 7th Circuit has held all funds coming into the offender’s trust fund are subject to withholding whatever the source of those funds.

- The facility is ordered by the court to forward the sums; an offender does not have to sign a voucher to disperse the funds to the court for the filing fees.
- When more than 1 filing fee order is received, the monthly installment payments are paid simultaneously not sequentially
 - 1 case is 20% of the incoming funds
 - 2 cases are 40% of the incoming funds
 - 3 cases are 60% of the incoming funds
 - 4 cases are 80% of the incoming funds
 - 5 cases are 100% of the incoming funds
 - An offender will begin paying on the 6th case as soon as one of the earlier cases is paid in full.”

about how to access such services. Many people are expressing extreme frustration and aggravation regarding their inability to successfully use the promised weekly free GTL video visits.

The services are extremely laggy, and it's hard to communicate with your loved ones when the whole gallery is shouting. – Western

Video visits always glitch and freeze or you get kicked out. COs let you out late for visits, so you miss out on half of your visit. They don't care if your family gets to see you or not. It's 'not their problem.' – Vienna

They don't give us call slips anymore to let us know we have a video visit and it is hard to get them to open our door so we can get to our visit. – Danville

Video visit is always cut short or not working at all because they start your time before your visitor is connected. – Robinson

We get video visits, but service sucks and cuts in and out. You can barely hear the person visiting you, I and feel that's not fair when it's the only way you can get a visit. – Robinson

The video visits have also been a hassle for families who have tried to utilize this service when the department or institution says systems are down, which has been weeks at a time in this institution. – Shawnee

The facilities with the highest positive response rate reporting functional free video visits still had less than a quarter of respondents' reporting the service worked, with 24.4% (10) at Murphysboro, a small facility, and 16.2% at male medium-security prison Centralia (82). The lowest percentage of functional free video visits reported were from a male medium-security prison, Hill, with just 0.5% (3) and a maximum-security prison, Pontiac, with 3.2% (60) reporting they had a functional free video visit. Since the time of the survey, some administrators reported to JHA that some early issues with video visits have since improved.² JHA continues to welcome feedback from users on their video visit experiences.

Video visits are all cancelled, or 'rescheduled' as they are putting it. – Decatur

I informed friends/family about the free video visits, and my mother signed up, but the officers didn't let me out of my cell on the scheduled day, claiming that they systems were down. Many of my peers reported the same thing... – Lawrence

How are we supposed to see our people once a week if we can't get one scheduled for nearly a month? – Menard

Many people commented that video visits were difficult to schedule because of limited time slots and that they were frequently canceled. Someone at Lawrence wrote that his family "gave up"

² For example, Hill administrators said that some mechanical issues with the video visitation equipment were resolved, as was another issue caused by the Orientation unit kiosk set up by GTL. That scheduling problem resulted because when a schedule was deemed full for a particular housing unit, visits would default to the Orientation kiosk, which would cancel the visits. The issue reportedly was resolved by removing Orientation as the backup kiosk and scheduling video visits only on assigned housing units, which administrators report should improve the cancelled video visit rate.

because none of his four prior scheduled video visits happened. At Menard people reported difficulty scheduling visits and someone commented that he was limited to 15-minute visits (whether free or paid by family) and told that this was because of “overflow of video visits.” However, he questioned the validity of this rationale because he observed empty kiosks and knew that the next person in line for a video visit was not scheduled until hours after him.

Throughout IDOC, people reported audio issues, screens freezing, and visits being cut short. People reported the difficulties with video visit access were causing them a lot of stress.

They [IDOC] always blame GTL for the problem because it's almost no way to write GTL up. – Pontiac

I have not seen my family since February. Every time a visit is scheduled, it gets cancelled a day or two later. GTL says it's a DOC problem and DOC says it's a GTL problem. – Vandalia

Since this COVID-19 there are some of us that would love to see our loved ones on video visit and for some odd reason our loved ones have not been approved and we are going on a good month ever since they came with a free video visit a week and nothing. Our family don't even care to pay to have the video visit, and it's not possible. I have not seen any of my loved ones since February. Not fair, especially in these times. – Stateville

They have given us the free video visit each month but it's irrelevant because they won't allow anyone to be approved on our list in the last 6 weeks. – Big Muddy

My family has been waiting for approval for a video visit and have not been approved. It's been 6 weeks and still waiting. – Dixon

The entire process has been a complete failure since our families aren't able to gain access to the site in order to set up on, then after that hassle it takes another 4 weeks to get approved. – Illinois River

My family and friends have been trying to set up video visits and it's been saying pending for the last 45 days. – Shawnee

People reported waiting over a month for approvals for video visits (and also for phones), and lack of access to counselors to facilitate approvals. People noted approvals were a difficulty for children as young children do not have to be listed as approved visitors on in-person visit lists, but had to be on the approved visitor list for video visits, where administrators stated “all persons requesting video visit must be listed for approval regardless of age.” Someone at Lawrence wrote, “Why for the video visits do family or friends have to send by fax or mail copies of driver's license and birth cert for themselves and children in order to get a visit? The process takes too long and they are asking for too much information when filling out an in-person visiting form its approved instantly. You receive a copy of the list back the next day. It should be as easy as an email for video visits. It's on a screen and an Officer is watching so if it's inappropriate they can shut it down.”

They say we're given one free video visit a week, but they deny all of the visitors. They even denied people that have already visited me or that have already visited me in person in the past. – Southwestern

Some others inquired if people could be considered for video visits that otherwise would be restricted from in-person visitation. Granting more leeway for video visits makes sense if the goal is to promote people maintaining outside connections with their communities, while at the same time protecting institutional security from threats that are uniquely present with in-person visitation (e.g. physical disruptions, introduction of contraband, etc.) JHA believes that communications should not be unnecessarily restricted for discipline and that such visits can be a motivation for improved behavior. Someone at Shawnee commented that he was denied video visits because he had dreadlocks, which should not occur.

Someone wrote in Spanish about difficulty with the GTL video visitation system and inability for contacting his family in Mexico.

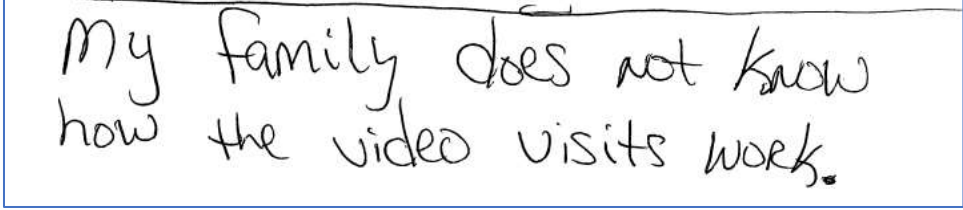
People in C+B grade cannot have video visits but they should make exceptions for people in C+B grade so they can see their people, you can have a contact visit with your family when the prison is not on lockdown but they won't let you have no video visits in B or C grade, that don't make sense. – Stateville

Some people in special or restricted statuses commented on their inability to use video visits, including people in segregation, mental health housing, reception (e.g., someone wrote they were told they had to be at the facility for 30 days before getting a video visit), or with grade restrictions. Although [administrative regulations typically](#) restrict video visits for people with grade restrictions, again, JHA's understanding was that video visits were intended to be available to everyone to compensate and substitute for in-person visits — which everyone regardless of status is entitled to in some form, but which have been unavailable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people also pointed out that in-person visits can be much longer than video visits.

IDOC reiterated the position that video visits were supposedly allowable and available for everyone in their [response](#) to our initial survey result report, and shared an email with us that was sent to all facilities, stating, "Grade restrictions will be lifted for offenders in "B" or "C" grade so they can have a video visit." Again, as with free phone calls, it was unclear if this free video visit was intended to occur one time or be a repeating opportunity.

The video visits need to be fixed! They have problems with running the video visit system. Due to the fact that there are "no visits" the video visits is the only option we have for seeing our loved ones and it is discouraging when the system fails because of human error (correctional staff). – Joliet

Physically some parts of facilities do not have video visit kiosks available, so facilitating visits for everyone would require movement, which may not have been permitted during certain COVID-19 restrictions. Some people reported that some staff did not facilitate timely movement for video visits or that visits were cut short. Again, it is unclear whether IDOC adequately articulated expectations or facilitated and addressed logistical issues for video visits to occur for everyone. Other reasons people reported visits were denied included being told the facility was short staffed and kiosks being broken on the housing unit and people's security restrictions not permitting them to use it in other locations. Some people wrote that if they could not get video visits due to physical lack of access, they should get more phone calls to supplement communications.



My family does not know
how the video visits work.

Please post something so we can instruct our family as to a much better way to make these video visits happen. – Taylorville

We need the information to be sent to our loved ones or given to us to register for the video visits. – Shawnee

Other people wrote about the difficulties for their families on the user end of the GTL experience. People also commented that IDOC staff are not trained on video visit usage so cannot help and that families have negative experiences with GTL customer support (e.g. can't reach a person to get help). Many people wrote their families had yet to be approved or had difficulty navigating the GTL products. Notably, **GTL video visits are incompatible with iPhones**. People also reported their families are not refunded when they pay for dysfunctional or malfunctioning services.

GTL has not allowed a free video visit for me. My wife and kids have been waiting for 2 months, just to get approved. The account said pending for 2 months. – Lincoln

Some people's family members do not know how to set up video visits and the video visits only run on certain days which makes it almost impossible for the visiting days and our families' off days to coincide. – Pontiac

*Honestly, this is a very depressing time in the world. I'm not trying to complain because I know people are dying out there. I could at least say that I feel healthy! I just want to see my family! My brother submitted and signed up for a video visit almost a month ago, and I still haven't heard nothing from no one! I wrote clinical services about this matter and I still haven't had a response! I suffer from depression and anxiety! And not being able to see my family is really taking a toll on me! I need to see them! ... I feel useless and helpless being here and my family having to deal with this virus out there!
– Pontiac*

On video visits offered free 15 min once a week but you can't get it unless your person you are visiting puts money on acct first to be able to set up visit. That defeats the purpose of a free visit when my people can't afford to put money on the acct in the first place. – Graham

Video visits are hard for me family to setup. They get confused and for older relatives it's too much. IDOC makes this difficult. – Graham

People reported that family could not set up visits without a credit card. Other people commented that it was difficult for elderly relatives who were not familiar with the technology or did not have a computer to set up visits.

Some people commented on the lack of privacy from other prisoners for video visitation in some areas; someone commented, "I don't like the fact that you're in the open in front of everybody cell

and everybody is in your face. It needs to be some type of cubicle or at least something to block you from the cells that are right in front of you.”

Overall, JHA has received many reports of issues with GTL functionality and people's difficulty taking advantage of free services offered. We hope the department will try to push the vendor for better service and user experience so that people can better maintain family connections, particularly while in-person visitation is suspended.

Some people also reported because they did not have full commissary access, they could not buy GTL credits for visits, emails, games, etc.

Several people commented to the effect that tablets should be utilized for more things, such as video visitation (and phone calls, legal research, commissary, access to other information, etc.), e.g. *“If majority of us inmates own this said tablet, and it has the camera, why don't this feature and app be implemented so we can have visits more often and sooner rather than later. This is the time 4 it to be utilized!”* However, we are unsure of whether this is feasible given Wi-Fi issues reported.

People who were able to use video visits were grateful for the opportunity.

I had my 1st video visit with my mother but for the 1st 10 minutes she couldn't get logged onto the GTL website. We believe it was bad wifi due to the storm. The lady CO told mom that it could be cause of the usage of the site. But the CO gave mom 5 xtra minutes due to the mess up. Very grateful for that. – Graham



TABLETS & EMAIL

Tablet service barely works. GTL messages to family only comes and goes once a week, leaving our family worried if we're still alive. – Southwestern

Many people reported issues with Wi-Fi access and commented that they could not use GTL tablets to send messages because the reception did not extend to their cells or sleeping areas where they were locked down. For just one of many examples, at Lawrence people commented that there is no Wi-Fi in the healthcare unit, which houses some people as live-ins, as well as having an infirmary population, and that they have been told people are "working on" fixing the Wi-Fi problem for over six months. People commented on paying hundreds of dollars for services they could not use. People also suggested various things to improve Wi-Fi signal strength.

As far as the emails, inmates like me have lost the ability to use that communication tool. I/others who don't have a tablet cannot use the email service. We are not allowed any time to use the kiosk. In fact, we are specifically told to stay off the kiosk if we try to walk back there during phone/shower time. – Western

At several facilities people also stated that they were not permitted movement to use kiosks or syncing stations if they did not have devices with Wi-Fi capacity. Others reported time out of cell was so limited they had to choose between trying to use showers, phones, and emails. People

also commented that kiosks were commonly shared high-touch areas that were not being cleaned between use.

This is an area where improvements are needed to take advantage of this technology and the opportunity to expand communication and access to information. Some people mentioned seeing COVID-19 memos on tablets. However, it was unclear if the advertised electronic “suggestion box” existed.

Some commented that better access to email would cut down the risk of virus transmission via physical mail.

I have no access to my E-mail account. This (Graham) isn't my parenting facility, so I can't access. I am a court writ and don't get to enjoy the same as regular population. They get to send free messages, get a free video visit. Me and 4 others can't. We've all wrote everyone to get our accounts here, but they won't allow it. – Graham

Again, some people with grade restrictions or in restricted status reported they were not permitted to use tablets or email, despite their belief that IDOC had lifted restrictions in light of the pandemic.

Trying to utilize the email system. But a lot of times it may take two days for a message to go out. We pay for these messages. They should go out instantly so family and friends know we are fine or if there is something wrong. – Graham

Some people reported emails coming in and going out with a delay of days to a week. Some people had concerns regarding emails being censored excessively. At some facilities, lack of staffing for security review of communications caused delays.

GTL and IDOC false Advertise
these tablets. We AS inmate in IDOC
is being Robbed. Blind!! With fake info.

It was unclear whether poor signal capacity was a vendor or IDOC issue.

Regarding the tablets, and GTL services. Us inmates here at Pontiac are having nothing but plagued problems with logging in, messaging, music, well everything with GTL. These problems are not being solved. I ask GTL, and they blame IDOC. IDOC blames GTL. I feel as though we need a representative to help. Help with getting services proper for what we pay for. We are unable to download music, get legal info, books, movies as well as newsfeed, podcasts as we are supposed to. Help with a reliable WIFI signal. I understand thousands of complaints have been made to the Better Business Bureau regarding GTL... What was supposed to be enjoyment turned out to be aggravation. – Pontiac

Again, some people wanted phone call, video visit, and legal research capacities on tablets, despite issues with the poor service.

Many of us get info and activities via our tablets. IDOC needs to authorize GTL to open up more services and apps to help us through this quarantine. We were promised

more games...e-books...movies and TV shows...etc. GTL tells us these apps are available, but they need IDOC to authorize their implementation. Please Help.
– Taylorville

In every institution practically, there have been repeated fights over the telephone, riots and all. This is because there are not enough phones. Well, these phone apps were created by GTL for security reasons. It will eliminate all the violence over the telephones. – Menard

I would like to ask if you can work with IDOC and GTL to provide us with some form of schooling thru the tablets and to eliminate the problem about the phones to activate the phone app on the tablets. It would make things a lot better if I could attend school thru my tablet like the rest of the schools are providing in society. GTL have the services available but IDOC is lagging in allowing GTL to provide us with these services. I have been locked up [decades] and every security level I go down it only becomes harder for me to attend school. I only need 2 classes to graduate and obtain my associate degree, and I was allowed more access to school in the more restrictive [medium] security facilities. It's like the more you follow the rules the least opportunity you have incentive-wise to continue. – Graham

The GTL tablets have software and features such as camera for video visits, phone service, and LexisNexis for law material. Why aren't those services being utilized on the tablets? This is the perfect time to utilize those services since we are stuck in the cell. – Hill

Some administrators also have expressed frustration with available tech products and functionality. They indicated that although decisions regarding GTL services are not made at the facility level, they continue to raise issues regarding problems with GTL products and services, including delays in responses to work orders or requests.³ Some administrators stated that technicians informed them that available bandwidth may not be able to sustain heavy streaming traffic, but that future investments in the institutional infrastructure could improve the access.

One person expressed that the only people who benefited from the free services offered by GTL were people with tablets, while those too poor to have tablets could not use the free credits for entertainment and emails.

JHA strongly encourages IDOC to work with GTL to improve user experience, as well as to figure out how to enhance communication and entertainment services for people who do not have use of the technology. JHA also reiterates the benefits of making contracts with outside vendors available to the public so that there is greater opportunity to voice concerns, seek redress and hold them accountable.



³ Hill administrators responded to facility follow up that starting that when the facility began selling tablets in November 2019, the population was notified that the WIFI signal was not strong enough to allow the tables to work inside cells and would only work in the dayroom areas.

MAIL

This facility is prolonging to distribute mail. I haven't received mail from my family in over 3-4 weeks. This can cause anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and other mental bad emotional thoughts. – Hill

Ill. River have no policy set up to establish how would indigent inmates send outgoing regular mail. At a time like these with COVID-19 pandemic I cannot write no one to check up on them or to respond to their letter to let them know of my situation. – Illinois River

While 85% of people reported in [survey responses](#) that they were able to get and send mail in the week preceding our survey, 11.4% (1, 763 people) could not. JHA frequently hears that mail is not timely within IDOC. Of the 12,780 people who responded to JHA surveys at 21 facilities between April 2018 and May 2019, only 14% reported mail was timely.

In COVID-19 survey responses, the facilities with the highest percentages of people who reported they had difficulties with mail in the prior week were male medium-security substance use disorder treatment prison Sheridan (24.4%, 235), Stateville (24.4%, 127), and Hill (21.2%, 126), all facilities with early reported cases of COVID-19. JHA had conducted a monitoring visit to Hill shortly prior to the pandemic, on March 4, 2020, at which time only 2% of the 2020 survey respondents agreed that mail was timely. JHA was pleased to see a few comments from Hill in COVID-19 surveys that mail had improved since our March visit, although administrators reported there was again a temporary staffing issue that they were working to correct at the time of COVID-19 survey response feedback.

They are not giving us our mail, I have mail that my family has sent to me over two weeks ago and they have receipts saying that they sent out mail and they are not sending out mail in a timely manner. – Joliet

Mail and pictures are received weeks later. – Southwestern

Some administrators have stated there was a few days delay in mail distribution purposely put in place to ensure the virus would not be spread via mail.

In [JHA's April 8 recommendations](#) we reiterated that IDOC should provide some free write-outs to people during this time to send letters at no cost in addition to providing phone calls, emails and video visits. Other jurisdictions have done this.

People commented that certain mail was slower to be screened, such as mail with photos or from abroad. Some people acknowledged that there may be staffing issues, e.g. from Pontiac, "*They need more than 1 person in the mailroom to process our mail;*" and "*They have several officers walking around or sitting down doing nothing. They should assign a couple to the mailroom until mail gets caught up.*" JHA agrees that communications should be prioritized as we [recommended](#).

The mail room routinely opens and reads contents of the sealed letters and disposes of them. – Taylorville

Our mail system is also behind usually by 2 weeks or more, leaving our mail outdated and on occasions having legal or privilege mail opened before being delivered to us.

– Graham

Some issues were raised in survey comments regarding fears of retaliation or mail tampering with internal institutional mail, as well as outgoing mail (including mail to attorneys), or worry that we would not receive their JHA surveys. There were several comments regarding distrust of the mail system; additionally, several people wrote in survey comments asking us to confirm receipt of their surveys, which we unfortunately do not have the capacity to do. Some people reported that staff improperly permitted other inmates to handle another's mail. Other people noted that their housing areas lacked mail drops and they did not have usual movement and access to the areas where mail would be picked up.

The COs are NOT announcing and picking up mail at all during the whole time we've been on lockdown, so we have to trust the certain inmate workers who are being let out to clean to drop out mail in the mailbox. – Hill

Mail has been severely delayed, institutional mail not being picked up every day.
– Joliet

Mail has been slow and inconsistent. The rules pertaining to what is or is not allowed change from person to person. It depends who is working. I asked the Warden's office for a list of what was not allowed. The Warden's office is always quick to respond but this request was ignored. I never received a response. – Illinois River

The only problem I have with the mail is our mail room is sending the mail back to our people if they use one of those stickers with their name and address on it. They use to rip them off just like they do the stamps. – Illinois River

A few people reported not receiving permissible items or items being sent back to senders arbitrarily, e.g. photos being sent back from Centralia for displaying “any hand sign” which is perceived as gang activity. People commented about not knowing what would be disallowed in photos and mail. **JHA again recommends IDOC make clearer rules about mail available to the public.**

As far as mail is concerned, it takes a very, very long time for us to get it. We have literally written at least 100 grievances on the mail lady, but nothing ever changes. In fact, when you write the mailroom up, she takes even longer with your mail. I have been waiting months for pictures and letters, yes months! – Lawrence

As with other commissary issues, some people reported they had difficulty being able to buy write-outs for letters, both due to their infrequent opportunity to shop at commissary and the commissary being out of stock.

Envelopes to write to my people take up ¼ of each shop. We shouldn't have to choose between writing our families and being able to buy detergent, cosmetics, and food. – Western

Additionally, some people at various facilities, for example at Menard and Stateville, reported not being able to obtain “inmate authorization for payment” forms and money vouchers and that this was interfering with their ability to send mail.

Being able to obtain certain needed forms are hard to come by, such money vouchers for postage or sending money out for church offerings/purchasing magazines subscriptions, and request slips to write medical or some other department here at the prison. – Graham



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