
Facility Update



Monitoring Visit to Illinois Youth Center – Warrenville 2023

Key Findings

1. Youth reported that they had as much access to mental health professionals as they needed, and that when they requested to speak with mental health, they were seen the same day.
2. Like many facilities, Warrenville struggles with staffing levels which has repercussions throughout the facility, including canceling school and limiting outdoor recreation time.
3. At the time of the 2023 visit, male high school graduates were no longer incarcerated at Warrenville out of recognition that there was little continuing education available there.
4. While operationalizing post-secondary educational and vocational programs remain challenges that impede youth engagement in recreation and productive activity, this facility has taken steps to improve the situation and mitigate youth frustration around this.

Updates

IYC-Warrenville is a coed youth center in Naperville, Illinois, about 30 miles from Chicago. It is the only Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) facility that houses female youth. It serves as the reception and classification center for male youth ages 13 and 14 and all female youth, and additionally houses both male and female youth out of reception status.



While much remains the same at this facility since JHA’s visit and [report on Warrenville from 2022](#), there are some notable changes and new observations from our most recent visit. JHA visited Warrenville on July 19, 2023. On the day of our visit the population was 19. Data from Warrenville, which accounts for 17 youth, reflects 13 boys—12 of whom were Black and one of whom was Bi-racial—and four girls—three Black and one Bi-racial. In comparison, documents provided to JHA at the time of our 2022 visit to Warrenville reflected 18 boys, four girls, and one transgender youth whose gender was not otherwise specified. Three youth, two boys and one girl, were 18 years or older; seven, five boys and two girls, were between the ages of 15 and 17; and six, all boys, were younger than 15. JHA has historically recommended that youth under age 15 be housed in IDJJ’s smaller youth centers, including Warrenville, so the facility’s shift towards the younger population seemed positive. Three youth were committed from Cook

County, six were from other counties in Northern Illinois, six were from Central Illinois, and two were from Southern Illinois. In the past, JHA has recommended that IDJJ house youth closer to home to better foster family engagement and support.

Youth generally expressed positive impressions of staff at Warrenville, specifically that staff wanted to connect with youth and tried to help them improve. Like JHA's 2021 and 2022 visits, youth reported that they had as much access to mental health professionals as they needed, and that when they requested to speak with mental health, they were seen the same day. The exception was teaching staff, which youth consistently reported was mixed with some teachers who were helpful and others who weren't. One youth expressed that staff were unintentionally patronizing because they were used to working with youth younger than him. A couple of youth also reported wanting to see more recreational activities geared towards older high schoolers, like more sports and better weights.

However, youth also said that they were not spending much time off the cottages other than to go to school, which they attributed to short staffing. Some youth additionally reported school cancellations, with one youth estimating that he went to school four days per week.

Administrators told JHA in September 2023 that there had been two school cancellations in July and seven in August due to a shortage of security staff. While regular school cancellations are not ideal for any youth center, this an improvement over the 2022 visit, when youth told JHA that school was cancelled multiple times a week, sometimes for days at a time.

Administrators reported in September 2023 that Warrenville had 21 active security staff and was allocated between 50 and 100 depending on population. They also reported that the changes to IDJJ's educational requirements for Juvenile Justice Specialists (JJS) – IDJJ's entry-level security position – which took effect in July 2023, had helped "tremendously" with recruiting. As of September, there were reportedly four prospective Warrenville staff at the academy.

Warrenville has long struggled to consistently provide continuing education for high school graduates at the facility, and this was a common concern among youth who had a high school diploma or a GED when JHA visited Warrenville in 2021 and 2022. When JHA visited Warrenville in 2022, there were seven graduates at the facility. However, at the time of the 2023 visit, male high school graduates were no longer incarcerated at Warrenville out of recognition that there was little continuing education available there. This was an improvement given that in

previous years youth reported having sought a transfer to Warrenville specifically for post-secondary educational programming, only to find the opportunities were no longer available when they arrived.

Warrenville is however the only location where female youth, regardless of graduation status, can be housed. Administrators told JHA in September 2023 that there had been three female graduates at Warrenville in 2023, two of whom were released shortly after graduating and one of whom was released a few days after getting off intake status. Administrators reported that female graduates were assigned jobs in the facility, participated in about five hours of organized programming a week, and spent additional time preparing for reentry with their case managers and mental health professionals. Administrators were hopeful that female graduates would be able to participate in vocational programs offered at St. Charles, a male youth center about fifteen miles from Warrenville, in the near future.

Warrenville was also working on bringing in onsite vocational programming. Administrators described a technical manufacturing program that they were in the process of identifying youth for. They were searching for an instructor to provide barbering and cosmetology programming through Larry's Barber College, which has not been offered consistently at Warrenville due to instructor availability. The position had reportedly been filled for two months in spring 2023 but was vacant at the time of the visit. IDJJ was also preparing to begin offering the classroom portion of driver's education to youth incarcerated in its three northern facilities.

Youth reported that outdoor recreation was infrequent, and a staff member who spoke with JHA on the visit said that this was because of weather concerns over the summer. According to documents provided by administrators, IDJJ policy advises facilities to consider postponing outdoor recreation if temperatures exceed 95 degrees. Additionally, air quality in the Chicago area was [deemed "very unhealthy"](#) in early summer 2023 due to smoke in the air from Canadian wildfires. Administrators further told JHA in September 2023 that staff levels had made it "close to impossible" for youth to safely recreate outdoors.

At the time of the 2023 visit, Warrenville had recently combined youth on two housing units into a larger unit, a move that was designed to conserve security staff. In order to do this, the facility reopened a housing unit that had been out of use for about a year. Youth on the unit were unhappy with the state it had been in when they first arrived there, feeling that it was unsanitary.

Administrators told JHA that they had tried to encourage a sense of ownership from the youth towards the housing unit by involving them in cleaning it up. Warrenville is an older facility that has had significant infrastructure needs; ensuring youth are housed in safe and clean spaces is critical to their safety and well-being.

Warrenville continues to provide higher levels of mental health treatment and support to the youth there, which is something youth report and value. However, short staffing and operationalizing post-secondary educational and vocational programs remain challenges that impede youth engagement in recreation and productive activity. IDJJ had acknowledged some of the facility's shortcomings and taken steps to mitigate frustration among youth.



This report was written by JHA staff. Media inquiries should be directed to JHA's Executive Director Jennifer Vollen-Katz at (312) 291-9183 or jvollen@thejha.org

Incarcerated individuals can send privileged mail to report concerns and issues to the John Howard Association, P.O. Box 10042, Chicago, IL 60610-0042. JHA staff read every letter and track this information to monitor what is occurring behind prison walls and to advocate for humane policies and practices. Family and friends can contact JHA via our website www.thejha.org or by leaving us a voicemail at (312) 291-9183.

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. JHA humbly thanks all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this report and who graciously shared their experiences and insights with us.

