



# STATEVILLE SPEAKS

Voices from the inside • Summer 2023

## Gov. Pritzker's Law Prohibiting Book Banning Must Extend to Those in Prison

By Jerel Matthews

Governor J.B. Pritzker recently signed a bill making Illinois the first state in the nation to outlaw book bans. "Everyone deserves to see themselves reflected in the books they read, the art they see, the history they learn," according to Governor Pritzker. Great legislation, great rhetoric, but does "everyone" include a population that is often forgotten and treated as less than human, a population that has been subjected to book bans and censorship for decades: people in Illinois prisons?

The Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) censors all ma-

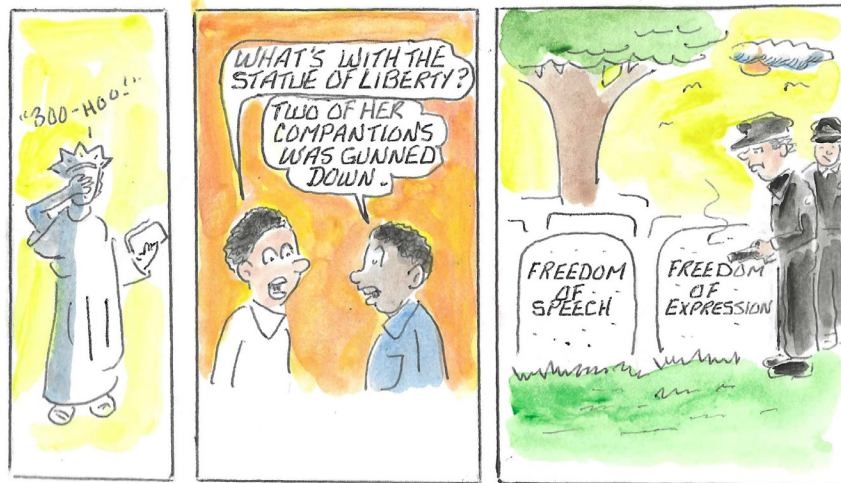
terials and publications that enter prisons. Its formal list of banned books spans over one thousand pages - and I can only access this list if I go to the law library. The justification for this censorship and banning of books takes place under the guise of ensuring the safety and security of the prison. Yet safety is both broadly and vaguely defined.

Less than a year ago at Stateville Correctional Center, where I live, two books I ordered for my mental health and for educational purposes were rejected: Introduction to the Theory of Yin-Yang by Kevin Dewayne Hughes and From Niggas to Gods: Part one by Akil. Both books were recommended to me to read. Introduction to the Theory of Yin-Yang is a meditation book related to martial arts that I hoped might help me cope with my severe anxiety. NBA player Kyrie Irving was suspended for promoting From Niggas to Gods and I wanted to find out what the fuss is about!

I never got the chance to read either of the books. Both were in violation of IDOC's standards for publication under section

G.2-d. According to IDOC, the books "encourage activities that may lead to the use of physical violence or group disruption."

But these books are just the tip of the iceberg. The IDOC is predicated on censorship. Our visitors, music, movies and our bodies are all deeply regulated. Our hair is contraband - when I was at Menard Prison people were sent to segregation until they agreed to cut off their dreadlocks. Recently, some prisoners at Stateville Prison requested that the prison movie channel show the award-winning documentary, The Thirteenth, that explores incarceration and the 13th Amendment. The documentary was banned and no rationale was offered.



Cartoon by Arkee Chaney

IDOC's rules dehumanize and break captives and aim to make those incarcerated (and outside loved ones) no longer value human life. If lucky enough to be released, we are sent back to human life uninformed and without the skills to survive, and any "reoffending" keeps the wheels of mass incarceration turning.

Along with many brothers, sisters, mothers and cousins, I am among the thousands of people held in a prison in Illinois. Education is a human right and a critical component to maintain one's humanity. I hope to return to my community one day, and how can I do this if I am denied all the tools that might support my transformation?

I am excited that Illinois is outlawing book bans. Young people need to read about the Black Lives Matter movement, queer lives, and the real histories of the United States. This commitment to learning, transformation and the exchange of ideas must extend to everyone, including those of us in prison. ●

# STATEVILLE SPEAKS

Summer 2023

*Stateville Speaks* is a newsletter written by and for incarcerated individuals, their families, those working in the correctional system, activists, advocates and everyone affected by prison conditions. It is available to any incarcerated individual who requests it regardless of their ability to pay, as well as any interested reader. Additionally, it is provided to every Illinois state senator, state representative, and Illinois Department of Corrections warden.

*Cover author:*

**JEREL MATTHEWS** is a father, son, brother and an abolitionist from the southside of Chicago. He is committed to abolishing mass incarceration and state violence against marginalized people on this planet. Jerel is currently incarcerated at Stateville Prison.

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### *Stateville Speaks* Summer 2023

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Art by Arkee

# The Harsh Law of Accountability and How Advocates Are Working to Change It

by Gail T. Smith

Why do so many people serve long sentences for crimes that somebody else committed, under the legal theory of accountability? This happens most often to people in a position of less power, for example, young people and women.

Under Illinois law, if you help or even try to help someone commit a crime, or take part in planning it, or ask or cause them to do it, you are legally accountable for it. Whenever two or more people agree to take part in an act that is illegal, anything that any one of them does can be used against everyone who was involved in any way. The only way that someone will not be held accountable is if they do something to undo the action they took before, warn the police before the offense can take place, or otherwise take action to prevent it from happening. The court has to find that each person had the intent to assist with the crime, or that there was a shared plan to commit the crime, called a common “criminal design.” This lets the courts convict someone of crimes committed by someone else even if that other person was never charged, or was acquitted or found guilty of a lesser offense.

Survivors of gender-based violence are particularly vulnerable to being convicted under these unjust laws. Here is one example of a survivor of violence who was charged and sentenced under a theory of accountability. At age 18, Tameka Newson and another teenage girl agreed to invite two men to an apartment, knowing that Tameka’s boyfriend and his cousin planned to rob them. Tameka did not feel that she had the option to refuse. When the men came to the apartment, Tameka stayed in the bedroom with her five-month-old baby. One of the men broke free and ran away. Tameka’s boyfriend’s cousin chased the man several blocks and shot him, killing him. Then the cousin was shot and killed by an off-duty officer.

In inviting the two men to the apartment, Tameka never thought anyone would be shot. She never shot anyone herself, and she was in the apartment several blocks away when the shootings occurred. Yet she is now serving a 50-year sentence for both killings under the theory of accountability. After 18 years in prison, she is now awaiting a decision from the governor on her clemency petition.

Judges consider six factors in deciding whether someone who did not actually commit the crime can be convicted under a theory of accountability. According to the Restore Justice Foundation, the six factors include:

1. *Being present during the commission of the crime (unless the person attempted to leave or tried to prevent the crime)*
2. *Acting as a lookout*
3. *Fleeing the scene after the crime*
4. *Continuing to associate with the main person involved afterwards*

5. *Failing to report the incident*

6. *Accepting illegal proceeds of the crime*

The theory of Accountability can be used to threaten and prosecute people who had a minor role in crimes someone else committed. Since younger people are more likely to take part in group actions and are more vulnerable to pressure, they are especially affected by long sentences, including de facto life sentences, for murders that they did not commit. This also is common for women and other marginalized people who have been abused or who are coerced to assist in a plan.

This past spring, Illinois Rep. Lakesia Collins introduced House Bill 2324 (which was also introduced as Senate Bill 2067). Instead of prosecuting someone for somebody else’s crime, this bill would create a separate offense of Accountability. The law outlines penalties, with reduced sentences compared to those currently imposed, and less prison time than if the person committed the accompanying offense. The new law would prevent courts from sentencing the person for the accompanying offense. It does not include language saying that people now in prison can apply to be resentenced. However, bills introduced in the legislature are never final until they are passed, and there is likely to be continued conversation about applying the provision retroactively. Retroactivity has been a thorny issue with legislators, and it’s often difficult to get bills passed that include it. However, many advocates believe it is crucial to promote sentencing bills that are retroactive, and they will continue to push for retroactivity in this legislation.

House Bill 2324 successfully passed the House Judiciary Committee and nine representatives signed on to support it as co-sponsors, but it did not yet move forward for a floor vote in the House. Advocates will continue to work to push it forward. If it does pass both houses and is signed by the governor, it will become effective immediately.

Relatedly, Senate Bill 2260 improves mitigation during sentencing of survivors of gender-based violence who were found guilty and sentenced for crimes without full consideration of the abuse they survived. It passed both houses and awaits the governor’s signature, but a crucial provision was removed. Originally, that bill also addressed accountability, stating, “A person is not so accountable, however, unless the statute defining the offense provides otherwise, if... he or she was subjected to specified and credible coercion, compulsion, or duress related to domestic abuse.” With so many survivors of gender-based violence in prison for offenses they took part in to protect themselves or their children against abuse, advocates hope to reintroduce that provision in the legislature and win passage.

Supporters of survivors of violence—and all who’ve been convicted under the legal theory of accountability—face an uphill battle, but it is an essential one. The coming season could see real shifts as advocates continue to fight for a change to the law. ●

**GAIL T. SMITH** is the founder of Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM) and the Children’s Best Interest Project. She is also a member of Love & Protect.



Photo: Roundtree Images

## This Guy Seems Determined: Orion Meadows Talks About his Re-Entry after 24 Years in Illinois Prisons

From an interview Brian Dolinar conducted with Orion Meadows

Professor Benny Lee, it started out with him. I heard about him while I was incarcerated. I had been out maybe two months, and I didn't have any employment. Somebody connected me with Benny Lee and I got in his program at the National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated (NAEFI).

### The Ball Gets Rolling

I went up to Kenosha, Wisconsin with Professor Lee, who also teaches at Northeastern Illinois University. That was after the protests for Jacob Blake, an African American man who was shot by a white cop. Tio Hardiman had heard a poem I had written about Martin Luther King and that got everything going. They asked me to come back and be part of a fundraising ball. A video of me reciting a poem at the ball circulated on Facebook, somebody saw that video, and asked me to be on a show on Instagram. I didn't even know how to use Instagram.

The ball has been rolling ever since. But it all started with meeting Professor Lee and being in his program.

A little bit after that, I met Professor Timothy Barnett and applied to be in the program University Without Walls. He took interest in some of the stuff that I was doing. He got me involved with Prison Neighborhood+Arts/Education Program (PNAP).

### Let's Give This Guy a Try

NAEFI is a re-entry organization, the analogy they use is a matrix. A matrix is basically a womb, a place where you get support, protection, but you are also nurtured and cultivated. They have

re-entry coaches. A lot of our members, they've come through the organization, and they've been successful, started their own businesses, bought homes, and got married.

When you have a record, you have obstacles, especially when you have done a lot of time. Professor Lee instructs you on how to market yourself as a formerly incarcerated person. For instance, instead of having a cover letter, you have an explanation letter. Because when there's gaps in your resume, you need to explain what occurred.

Professor Lee saw me always showing up. Whenever he called upon me, I was there. He rewarded me by putting in a word for me. My first job was with Inner Voice, an organization that provides housing for the homeless, they took his word to hire me. I stayed there for almost 11 months.

I was traveling with Professor Lee when he was doing trainings with the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, they are based on Kingian philosophy. I saw they were hiring for a trainer. But still, people were reluctant to hire me, I had been gone so long. But Professor Lee convinced them, he said this guy can get the job done. I've been there for nearly a year now.

So it's been pretty good for me to be honest with you.

I think a lot of it is because of what I was doing before I got out. If I didn't have poetry, I wouldn't be where I'm at now. People will listen to me because I'm a poet and I've published three books. That gave me an advantage. People think this guy seems like he's determined. Let's give him a try.

### What Brings You Joy?

Walking gives me joy, when I'm walking, sometimes downtown, just walking and taking everything in. My father was a big walker, he walked a lot. It gives me joy to be able to just walk down the street and not have to worry about there being a fence, an enclosed gate. I could just keep going until I'm tired. That gives me joy.

Being able to build community gives me joy. Malcolm X stated that travel broadens the mind. My way of traveling was learning about the world and different cultures through books. Now I meet new and interesting people by networking which my ability as a poet and performance artist allows me to do.

I also find joy in learning from the poets and artists in the community out here who are thriving. I am able to reciprocate by teaching them things about the genre that many of them have not been exposed to. I have formal training in the genre which gives me a perspective many of them don't have since they developed their craft on the open mic circuit. Therefore, I challenge and encourage them to study and expand their dexterity as artists. It is a great joy witnessing artists embracing new things. ●

**ORION MEADOWS** spent 24 years in Illinois prisons. He published three books of poetry while incarcerated. Currently host of the *Prison Freedom* show on PIC TV, Meadows is also a member of the interim editorial board at *Stateville Speaks*.

# RE-ENTRY RESOURCES

**National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated (NAEFI)**  
Sankofa Cultural Arts & Business Center, 5820 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago, IL 60651 (773) 593-2540  
naefimmentor.wixsite.com/naefi

**Institute for Nonviolence Chicago**  
Austin (Main Office), 819 N. Leamington St., Chicago, IL 60651 (773) 417-7421 nonviolencechicago.org

**Pushing Envelopes Chicago** see page 11 for more info  
P.O. Box 577942 Chicago, IL, 60657  
pushingenvelopeschicago.org

## The Struggle Continues: Advocating for Mental Health Wellness in IDOC

by Mr. Patrice Lumumba Daniels

The Joliet Treatment Center (JTC) and Joliet Inpatient Treatment Center (JITC) are adult multi-security level facilities that the Illinois Department of Corrections has designated as sites for mental health treatment. The JTC is a repurposed, formerly closed juvenile prison that consists of a residential treatment unit, a minimum/medium security unit, and a “behavior modification” unit. The JITC is a newly built co-ed \$150 million acute care inpatient facility that sits adjacent to the JTC.

Both are, in part, the by-product of a settlement reached with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) in what is now known as Daniels v. Jeffreys (formerly Rasha v. Walker).

I and three others arrived at the JTC on November 6, 2017, shortly after the facility’s inception. The environment was unlike anything I’d ever experienced in my 29 years of incarceration. The officers were actually kind, attentive, and encouraged to interact with us. They played cards, board games, and basketball with us. We were rarely ever in our single-man cells. The food was superb. We had yard/gym daily, group/recreational/art therapy daily, and it was clean and quiet.

Does this sound too good to be true? I thought so too. It was a mindblowing and major adjustment for me. All I’d ever known was serving time in maximum-security and supermax prisons. As time went on, I bought in and became a true champion of the JTC and its promise.

The downside was, due to the fact there wasn’t an infrastructure in place, there was no commissary (to purchase food and supplies), cable TV, school, or law library. However, the aforementioned activities seemed to make up for the facility’s deficiencies.

Once an infrastructure was installed, the facility seemed to become a thriving organism propelled by a consensus committed to embodying an environment conducive to wellness. As the saying goes, it starts at the top, and the then warden was all in on the idea of the JTC being a real treatment facility.

Sadly, those days are long gone.

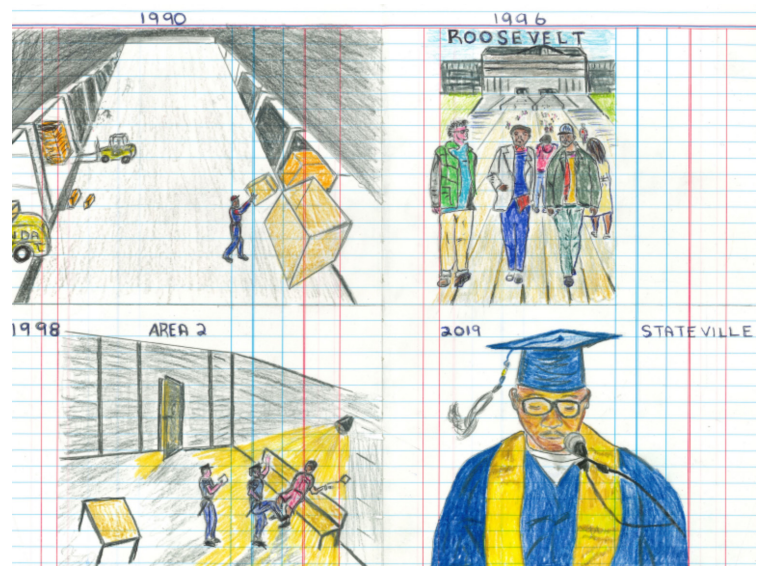
Due to new management, managerial infighting, COVID-19 restrictions, and mass exodus of staff, the facility has become a prison masquerading as a treatment center. The vast majority of employees that signed up to work here for the right reasons have long since left. There has subsequently been an abandonment of new practices to address behavioral challenges.

On the person-in-custody side, I am a dinosaur. I was a true believer in the notion that good treatment and corrections could coexist. For a time it did! I haven’t lost hope though. I firmly believe that with cohesive management, the reestablishment of authentic de-escalation practices, additional therapeutic options like music and pet therapy, incentivizing better staff/resident engagement, and operational consistency and accountability, things can improve.

I remain here because I’ve invested a lot of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual capital into this place, and I want it to succeed. More importantly, as someone diagnosed with a serious mental illness, it is in my personal interest to advocate for the best possible care IDOC can provide. Many of our lives depend upon it.

Having said that, I know that the “best possible care IDOC can provide” is inherently limited. Don’t mistake my advocacy for prisoners to be an advocacy for prisons. There was a time when there weren’t any prisons, and that time will come again. ●

**PATRICE LUMUMBA DANIELS** is an advocate for people with mental illness and a mentor who wants to be known for his service to humanity. He is a juvenile lifer who has been incarcerated for 29 years.



“Panel Documentary” by Darrell Wayne Fair (b. 1967) US Marine Corps veteran. Featured in the 2023 exhibit “Surviving the Long Wars: Residuals and Rebellions” at Newberry Library. Darrell was a DEMIL Art Fellow for the 2023 Veteran Art Triennial exhibition. Prison+Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP).

## THE BATTLE OF NATURE

by Chester "C Mac" McKinney

Mother nature her beauty and splendor,  
 in green pastures, navigable valleys, and living  
 hillsides,  
 fragrance of roses and lilies permeate the air,  
 through infinite cloudless blue skies the sunlight  
 beams,  
 nurtures the array of plants and the canopy of  
 trees,  
 blossom of fruits and branches of leaves,  
 breathes in carbon dioxide, release oxygen in the  
 atmosphere,  
 in the process of photosynthesis, turns light energy  
 into food,  
 Mother nature feeds the pastures, valleys, hillsides  
 and waters,  
 endless streams, hungry rivers and flowing  
 waterfalls,  
 the splash of fish and laugh of waves,  
 the aesthetics of the rainbow mountains in  
 Arizona, Peru, St. Lucia and China,  
 peaks covered with softly fallen snowflakes,  
 morning dew glistens the landscape,  
 Mother nature loveliness is slowly diminishing,  
 cause of her caretakers vain and abuse,  
 through technology, science and industries,  
 pollute the air, contaminate the waters and decay  
 the soil,  
 No freshness of dawn, no splash of fish nor  
 budding through fertile sod,  
 Mother nature has lost her serenity

## THE FUNCTIONALITY OF HATE

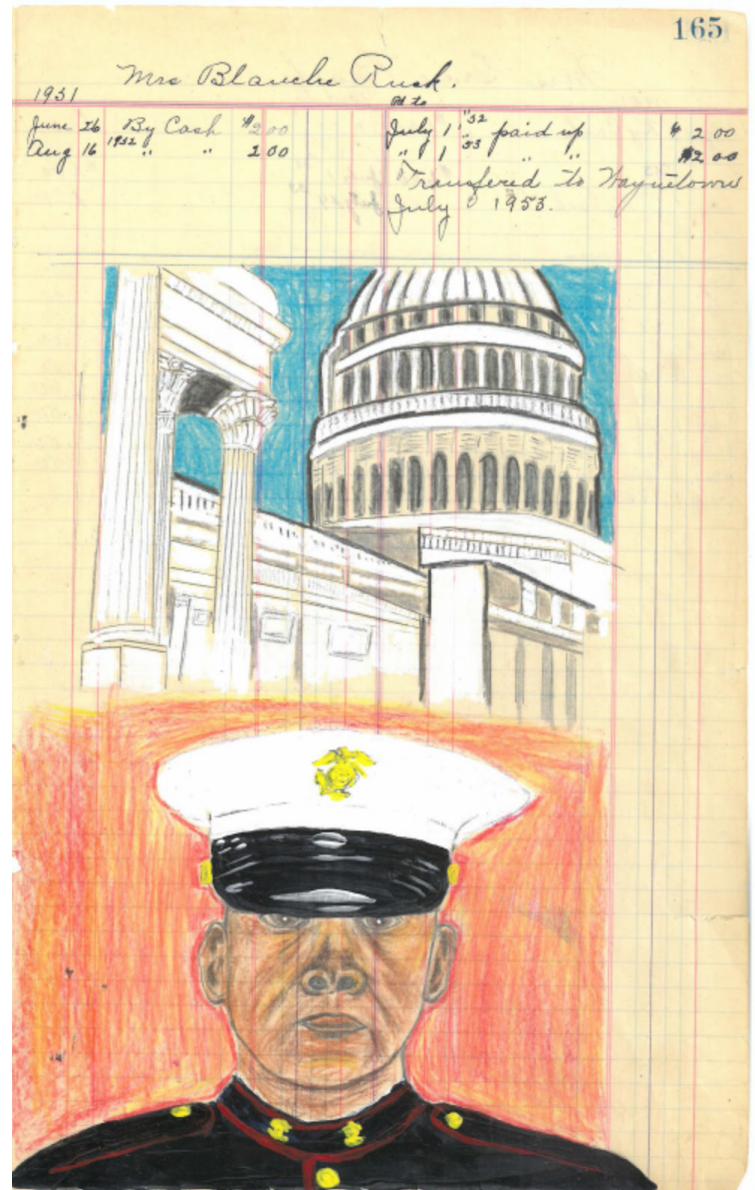
by Arnold Joyner

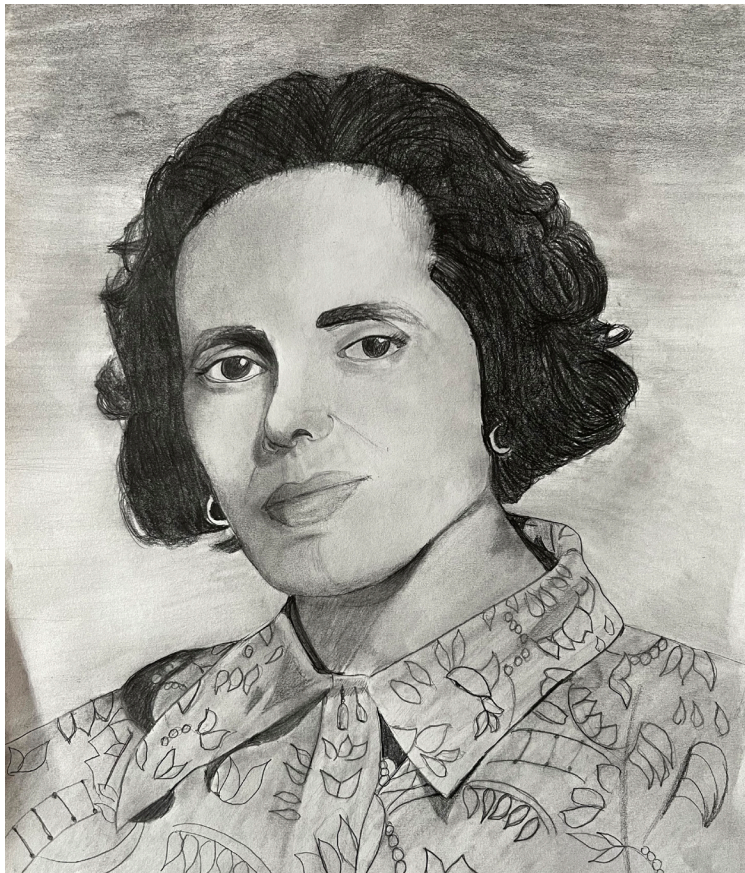
I was born from love that has turned to hate. America  
 hasn't truly Loved me. Why? It's the color of my Face.  
 Now, I must learn how to de-escalate. Their hate simply  
 can't be my fate. However, it's always been their hate,  
 that separates, then dictates, how lives in Chicago will  
 participate.

They've made mistake after mistake, and their power and  
 policies continue to generate more hate. It's functionality  
 has been tested state by state. Now, we have racists,  
 they said are great. We didn't care, so we packed our  
 stuff to migrate. Once we got to the North, we witness  
 firsthand, their imaginary iron-gate. It was intentionally  
 built to segregate. No questions asked, no debate.  
 The less than must stay on their side of the iron-

gate. While the functionality of hate disseminates.  
 Communities aren't the same, wait, they discriminate.  
 No wonder why bad people want to regulate. Politics  
 in Chicago, make people become irate. They're lying  
 and stealing off the poor people plates. The poor  
 eat unhealthy foods already, because the stores are  
 underrate. The Food provided shouldn't even be ate. It's  
 full of diabetes, hypertension and an early death date.

It mattered not how we articulate, we simply weren't  
 invited at any rate, yet we've Integrate. Now we can't  
 escape hate. We also continue to take their bait. I guess  
 it's our Christian faith, we want Jesus to emancipate.  
 Since the 13th Amendment only reiterates, legalize  
 slavery and the functionality of hate, we must create and  
 not be last, or late.





## HARRIET'S SON by Darvin Henderson

Stop to watch the impact we've had on each other creates a deep memory. A mother in a determined mind state is like watching a work of art, indeed! Her unlimited sacrifices, the humiliation you've faced from being disappointed, on top of having to endure being frisked in order to visit. You have the weight of the world on your shoulders and of all of your problems "Freedom" is the order of the day! No dollar amount can make up 4 the time lost. Send a letter out for help, hold your breath as we share air as if we're trapped inside a steam hot plastic bag. Jeans are soaking wet, fighting for sanity as Full Metal Jacket comes 2 mind as we strive for progress. While you wait, with patience like a wolf, reparation is due! Always remember, I'll never have another love like yours, no Language can ever express a Mother's Worth. -Love You-

I'm Harriet's Son

unconditional,  
Darvin Henderson

## THE WORST KIND by Arnold Joyner

I'm forced to be around some People who are considered the worst kind. The majority of these People were convicted of their said crime. Yes, I'm personally Guilty of my crimes, I vowed to GOD I would stop using drugs and lying. For this was my lifestyle daily before I plead to my crimes.

Integrity, dignity, Honor and loyalty I left behind. I was constantly drug induced and losing my ever-loving mind. I was like the blind leading the blind. However, I wasn't one of a Kind. There's millions of Americans suffering this illness and others combined.

Society labeled me a dope fiend and ex-con for all time, but these racist who helped destroy America's unification. They too are a part of The Worst Kind. They've done this to America through their generational ancestry bloodline. Plus, the majority of the founders found this action to be acceptable and just fine. Yet, The Southerner's knock Abraham Lincoln for changing his mind. He knew servility was running out of time.

Now that everyone's WOKE and recognize "The Truth," why are some Americans still dissatisfied, complaining, and crying, about the conditions of our Hearts and Minds? Those of us who are in Prison will constantly fall behind. For we are judged to be unkind. The State will provide ten dollars and send us flying. Here in Illinois Prisons, staff don't care if an offender receives a skill set or completely wastes his/her time. Accountability has stayed on the decline. A lot of staff have predicted an offender will return just in matter of time. Ask them how they have helped offenders and you'll really hear lying.

How does a prisoner become functional after all that time? I personally live by my M.A.N. (Motivate, Assist and Nurture) through my positive GODLY Heart, Spirit & Mind.

I know supporters of this broken system pretend everything's fine. I just want to prove to them all, I'm overtly one of the best kind, instead of one of the worst kind. Can we ever be Satisfied? Because nothing's worked so far for us within this day and time! ●

**Left:** "The Facade" by Darrell Wayne Fair (b. 1967) US Marine Corps veteran. Featured in the 2023 exhibit "Surviving the Long Wars: Residuals and Rebellions" at Newberry Library. Darrell was a DEMIL Art Fellow for the 2023 Veteran Art Triennial exhibition. Prison+Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP).

**Right:** "Grandmother Evengelina" by Joan Luna. From "Drawing Family Portraits Community History and Freedom Dreams," taught by Aaron Hughes for PNAP at Stateville Prison.

## **In Brutal Summer Heat, Prisoners Say Their Cells Are Like ‘Stifling Hot Coffins’**

by Victoria Law

“I have become one with my sweat,” RòDerick Zavala declared. Zavala is incarcerated at the Menard Correctional Center on the banks of the Mississippi River. Opened in 1878, the prison currently incarcerates nearly 2,200 men. Menard is one of the many Illinois prisons that lack an effective cooling system.

The 46-year-old shares a concrete and steel cell with a cellmate. “No air gets in and no air escapes,” he told Truthout. The windows open only six inches but their screens are caked with years of debris, dirt and sludge, forming another barrier to any breeze that might blow in.

Many of the 15 fans along the corridor of his housing unit are broken. Those that work have not been cleaned in years, creating cyclones of dirt, dust and dander.

With COVID came weeks and months of lockdowns. Confined to their cells, incarcerated people were unable to seek slightly cooler temperatures outside or access even the eight-ounce cup of ice normally allocated to each person once each day. These lockdowns have continued far past the officially declared end of the COVID emergency. In mid-June, Zavala told Truthout that he had only been outside twice during the past two months.

“Seven days a week, 24 hours a day, [I’m] in a place that feels as



“Ernie” by Robert Saffold. From “Drawing Family Portraits Community History and Freedom Dreams,” taught by Aaron Hughes for PNAP at Stateville Prison.

though I’m wearing a 15-pound blanket of musky, smoldering heat,” he said.

Zavala suffers from severe asthma, sinus issues and bouts of bronchitis. The combination of summer heat and dust tornadoes often leave him gasping for breath. And, he added, “there are many with worse health issues than mine, including elderly human beings.”

Even as technology advances to cool homes and businesses, jails and prisons have been slow, if not resistant, to adapting ways to systemically cool their environments. Those confined inside prisons have also been aging, making them more susceptible to the extreme temperatures and lack of respite. Between 1995 and 2010, the number of people ages 55 and older nearly quadrupled in prisons. By the end of 2020, more than 22 percent (or over 261,000 people) in U.S. prisons were 50 or older. By 2030, experts estimate that one-third of the nation’s prisoners will be over 50.

Moreover, prolonged exposure to extreme heat can impact internal organs, causing renal failure, heart attack and strokes. It can also lead to heat stroke and dehydration. In at least 10 Illinois prisons, water contamination prevents incarcerated people from staving off dehydration.

### **“Our Walls Start to Sweat”**

Stateville Correctional Center is approximately 40 miles southwest of Chicago and Lake Michigan. Still, summers feel stifling in the nearly century-old prison.

“When the temperature gets in the 80s and up, our walls start to sweat,” Manuel Metlock told Truthout.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health experts advise staying hydrated to avoid heat illness. But Stateville is one of several Illinois prisons where legionella, the bacteria that causes the severe lung infection Legionnaires’ disease, was found in the water.

Metlock buys bottled water from the commissary. Every two weeks, he can buy up to 24 16-ounce bottles, an amount which he notes is not enough to stay hydrated. During the prison’s first shift, staff distribute drinking water from bags; that is the only way that people without money can access clean drinking water.

In the summers before COVID, Metlock and others might escape their stultifying windowless cells by going to the yard. But, like many other prisons across the nation, Stateville began experiencing staff shortages during the pandemic and, as of September 2022, staffing levels were at two-thirds. The lack of staff has caused cancellations of programs, school, yard and chow – and more time locked in a cell that feels 10 degrees hotter than outside.

“It feels very sticky and all we can do is strip down to our undergarments, lay under the fan and try our best not to move,” he wrote in an e-message. That fan is the size of a grapefruit. Metlock washes in cold water five times a day, but even that relief is fleeting.

### **“Like Hell on Earth”**



Every May, Paula checked the condition of her fan. If it was more than two years old, she spent \$25 to buy a new one at the commissary. “You need that fan,” she told Truthout. “It helps you survive.” (Paula asked that only her first name be published to protect her privacy.)

Paula spent 32 years in Illinois’s prisons. Every summer, she and other women showered several times a day. They waited in line to collect ice from the ice machines in the day room (the common area of the housing unit), they sat in front of their fans in wet bathrobes, and they slept in wet bed sheets.

Those few options were slowly taken from them. In 2013 the state shuttered Dwight Correctional Center. Paula was among those transferred 100 miles southwest to Logan Correctional Center. During the move, staff confiscated the prison-issued bathrobes. At Logan, the commissary sold terry cloth robes but, Paula explained, they were expensive and couldn’t get wet enough to cool the wearer.

The water streaming from the shower heads was too hot for relief. Women filled empty soda bottles with cool water from the bathroom sink and ducked into the shower to douse themselves.

“Women have unique needs when it comes to temperature control,” said Alexis Mansfield, senior adviser at the Women’s Justice Institute, a nonprofit working with people in Illinois women’s prisons. “When it comes to people in women’s prisons who are pregnant, experiencing menopause, or perhaps taking hormones due to being transgender, the effect of not having air conditioning is compounded.”

That’s what Paula learned when she hit perimenopause, or the period before menopause, and began having hot flashes. “You felt like you were on fire,” she described.

In 2020 and 2021, as a COVID precaution, prison staff stopped allowing women into the day room. Occasionally, a sympathetic officer would allow one woman to fetch a bucket of ice and distribute it to the women along the corridor. They were not allowed into the yard, which was always cooler than their cells. Instead, women were left to swelter in their four-person cells.

“You’d have the fan on high with a wet sheet on top of you,” Paula recalled. “It was a touch of hell on earth.”

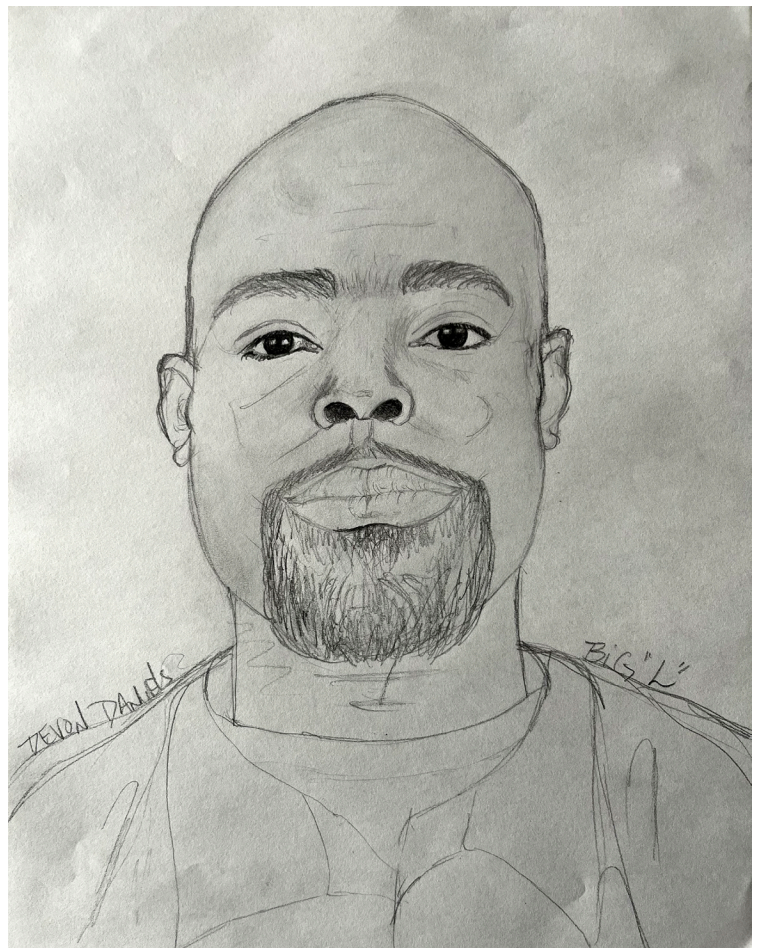
That’s what Lydia Vision recalls as well. Vision spent 19.5 years in Illinois prisons, none of which had air conditioning. “The floors sweat. The walls sweat. You are in a hot box,” she told Truthout. In 2019, she began estrogen and a testosterone blocker, which provided some respite. But that relief was interrupted on several occasions when staff failed to refill her hormone prescriptions.

“When my hormones dipped, it kicked me into the sweats,” Vision told Truthout. “All of a sudden, I’m raining sweat. And there’s no relief to that.”

### Changing the Climate Behind Bars Means Releasing People

From his cement cell in Illinois, Metlock asked, “What changes are needed to change the climate behind bars?”

He answered his own question: “To have real opportunities for people to come home.”



“Big L” by Devon Daniels. From “Drawing Family Portraits Community History and Freedom Dreams,” taught by Aaron Hughes for PNAP at Stateville Prison.

Illinois eliminated parole in 1978. That means that Metlock, imprisoned for the past 23 years for an act he committed at age 20, is expected to spend another 27 summers in prison.

“I haven’t had any disciplinary issues since 2005, I have 45 certificates, three degrees and a master’s degree,” he said. But without legislative change, Metlock will not be able to argue for a second chance before age 70.

Illinois advocates are organizing to bring back parole. They’re also pushing for an elderly parole bill in which people ages 55 and older can apply for parole after 25 years in prison.

Activists vow to continue their struggle as summer conditions fester behind bars. ●

*An extended version of this piece was originally published in Truthout on July 3, 2023. For the full article, please visit [www.truthout.org](http://www.truthout.org)*

**VICTORIA LAW** is a freelance journalist who focuses on the intersections of incarceration, gender and resistance. She’s the author of “Prisons Make Us Safer”: And 20 Other Myths about Mass Incarceration (2021) and the coauthor of Prison by Any Other Name: The Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms (2020).

## How To File A FOIA Request

by Clifford L. Powers

If you are investigating a criminal case to support a petition, preparing for a civil lawsuit, or are just hunting for useful information, one of the best tools you have at hand is the Illinois Freedom of Information Act. In this article you will find answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about what FOIA is, what it can be used for, and how to file a request under the act.

### What is the Freedom of Information Act?

The FOIA is a section of state law found at 5 ILCS 140/1 to 140/11, that requires government agencies, and their subsidiaries, within Illinois to provide access to public records upon request. Illinois has one of the best FOIA laws in the nation.

### What can I request using the FOIA?

Under FOIA you are able to request copies of records created, or possessed, by a government agency. These records may be paper documents, photos, audio/video recordings, or any other type of document that may exist. It is important to understand that you cannot simply ask questions or request information; what you request must be an already created record.

### Who do I send my request to?

You must send your request to the FOIA officer at the agency that you believe has the records you want. It is okay if you don't know this person's name as long as the request and envelope are addressed to the agency and the "FOIA Officer." If you are not sure what agency might have the records, then it might be a good idea to send the request to multiple places. The act does not apply to the courts.

### Will I have to pay for copies?

The first 50 pages of black/white photocopies are free. Additional pages beyond the first 50 have to be paid for. If the records you request require colored copies, or are stored digitally such as on a CD, hard drive, etc., you will have to pay for what you want. The prices for these items are set by law in section 6 of the act.

### How do I write a FOIA request?

Writing a FOIA request is easy and can be done on a standard form or on any piece of paper. There are a few things you should include in your request:

1. A title. You can simply title it, "Freedom of Information Act Request."
2. Your name, ID number, and address.
3. The name of the agency and its address.
4. A list of the records that you want copies of. If you do not know what they are officially called, then you can give a description and provide keywords, phrases, or names that could be used to locate the records.

5. The date(s) of the records requested.

6. The date the request is being made.

7. Your signature.

### When will I get a response?

For most requests the act requires the public agency to send you a response, with records requested, five days after they receive your request. If your request is large or for commercial purposes, then the public agency has twenty days to respond. If they need more time, they must send you notification of an extension after five days.

### What do I do if my request is denied?

The public agency may deny you records that fall under any of the many exemptions found in sections 7 and 7.5 of the act. If you believe that the records you requested do not qualify as exempt, you can send an appeal to the Office of the Attorney General. If you have exhausted these options, you will need to file a civil lawsuit under section 11 of the act in order to force the public agency to produce the records.

At this point you should understand FOIA well enough to begin digging for information. If you are serious about putting this valuable tool to use, you should take the time to actually read the act and learn the ins and outs, especially if you plan on going to court. Either way, keep this Q&A on hand as a quick reference any time you write out a request. ●

**CLIFFORD L. POWERS** is a member of the Jailhouse Lawyers Initiative and a long-time advocate. He is currently serving a 45-year sentence at Western Correctional Center.

## Announcements

### Report Finds Illinois Many Illinois Prison in Disrepair

A damning report by an independent agency found that Illinois prisons face \$2.5 billion in deferred maintenance. It said that Stateville, Pontiac, and Logan prisons were nearly "inoperable."

Alan Mills, of the Uptown People's Law Center, told *Stateville Speaks*, "While I don't disagree at all with the assessment of the decrepit nature of our prisons, before we spend these huge sums of taxpayer dollars, we need to release the elderly, disabled, and terminally ill prisoners, and rethink why we have thousands of people in our prisons who are going to be there for less than 6 months or who the legislature has provided could be on home supervision."

As the report noted, the prison population has dropped by roughly 40% in the last decade, from 49,000 to 29,000, providing the opportunity to "right-size the agency." Even in the face of decarceration trends, Illinois has refused to close any of its 27 prisons. Opposition from AFSCME, the prison guards' union, is largely responsible. This latest report provides further ammunition for policy makers to call for closing prisons. ●

## Free to Heal Releases Report on Civil Commitment

2023 marks the 10th year that Free to Heal has been working to understand and end civil commitment in Illinois. Illinois has been practicing civil commitment – or involuntarily detaining people who have been convicted of sex offenses to a “treatment” facility with no definite end date – since the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Though thousands of advocates are working on reforming and abolishing the criminal legal system in Illinois and around the U.S., civil commitment is seldom talked about. Even the savviest of activists are often entirely unaware that this shadowy practice exists: Over 6,000 people are held in 20 states, including Illinois and the federal Bureau of Prisons.

Free to Heal is a small collective of researcher-activists, all of whom have experienced sexual harm. Through penpal relationships with people inside Rushville Treatment and Detention Facility, one of two civil commitment facilities in Illinois, we heard alarming stories about rampant abuse and medical neglect. We sent a 50-question survey into Rushville in the spring of 2019, and in December of 2022, we published the results in a report called Inside “Illinois Civil Commitment: Treatment Behind Razor Wire.” The report called for the abolition of civil commitment, and included these findings:

- *Civil commitment at Rushville Treatment and Detention Facility is punishment, not treatment.*
- *Civil commitment at Rushville disproportionately harms people from marginalized groups, particularly LGBTQ+, Black, multiracial, and Indigenous people.*
- *Rushville is a violent place with poor living conditions.*
- *Civil commitment at Rushville is a life sentence.*

Free to Heal is meeting with other advocates to plan next steps towards ending this practice. Loved ones in the free world can print copies of the report for you and learn more at [insidecivcomil.com](http://insidecivcomil.com)

**Pushing Envelopes Chicago** (formerly Black and Pink Chicago) is grounded in prison abolition and builds lgbtq+ community across bars through penpal relationships, legal aid, and re-entry support. “To push the envelope” is a phrase that means to extend the limits of what is possible or take radical risks. We recognize that surviving incarceration is a radical and transcendent risk, and every day is an incredible act of resilience, particularly for lgbtq+ people.

We are accessible to every prison and jail in Illinois for people who identify as lgbtq+ and/or are living with HIV. We believe that no one is disposable, that prison abolition is inextricably linked to lgbtq+ liberation, and that our work is not finished until everyone is free from all forms of imprisonment, surveillance, and punishment.

We collaborate with other organizations in Chicago to fight against criminal registries and housing banishment laws that perpetuate homelessness and reincarceration, to support clemency campaigns and lawsuits against IDOC, and to ensure that our folks have the tools they need to survive, both while locked up and for those who are released. We are also currently working on becoming a nonprofit in order to better serve our community.

If you identify as being a part of this community, would like a pen pal or are getting released soon, don’t hesitate to write to us. We will try our best to support. Sending lots of love to you all!

**Pushing Envelopes Chicago**  
P.O. Box 577942 Chicago, IL, 60657  
[pushingenvelopeschicago.org](http://pushingenvelopeschicago.org) ●

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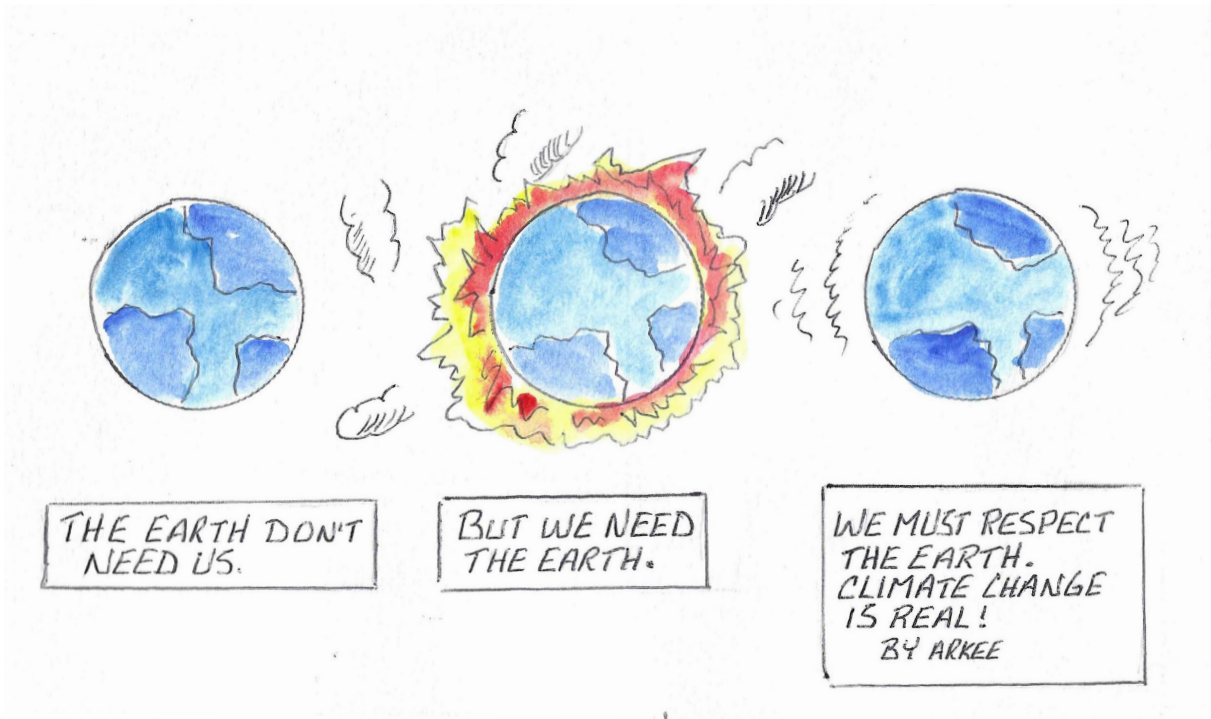
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