

Corrections Connections

Illinois Department of Corrections | Newsletter

Spring 2025

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Message from Leadership

Dear Team,

I want to take a moment to introduce myself and share a few thoughts as I step into my new role as Chief of Staff for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

My journey with IDOC began over 25 years ago as a Correctional Officer at Tamms Correctional Center. Since then, I've had the privilege of serving in various roles from Correctional Lieutenant, where I gained valuable experience as the Facility Security Specialist and the Institutional Tactical Commander, to Shift Supervisor, Assistant Warden, and Warden. Each position has given me invaluable insight into our staff's daily challenges and responsibilities. I carry those experiences as I take on this new leadership role.

I recognize that having adequate and well-trained staff is essential for effective operations. One of my immediate goals is to address the staffing shortages we continue to experience across the state. Our robust agenda aims to revitalize training and enhance the resources to recruit and prepare the skilled workforce needed to meet the demands of our facilities. We are working to expand and enhance regional training sites, allowing new team members to train closer to home and join the ranks more quickly and effectively. This initiative is not only about filling vacancies and expediting onboarding, but it's about building stronger teams and creating more sustainable paths for those who want to serve their communities through IDOC.

Equally important is our renewed commitment to staff wellness. Correctional work is inherently demanding, and your mental and physical well-being is a top priority. Drawing from my experience in corrections, I recognize the unique pressures you face daily. That's why we are implementing initiatives to support our frontline staff's health and resilience. I am working with SWRT to create more opportunities to engage directly with you, hear your feedback, and make meaningful improvements to the work environment. This effort goes beyond day-to-day operations; it's about how we support you as professionals and individuals.

Leadership development is another area I'm passionate about. The leaders who have the most impact on staff are the ones who give staff hope. The future of this Department relies on strong, capable leaders who inspire trust and bring out the best in their teams. Together, we're working to develop the next generation of leaders and build a culture that supports growth, accountability, and integrity at every level.

I believe the best ideas come from those doing the work, including each of you. As I travel across the state and visit our facilities, I look forward to hearing your ideas, learning from your experiences, and working with you to shape the future of this Department. I am committed to not only enhancing our operational capacities but also positioning IDOC as a leader in correctional reform.

Thank you for your continued commitment to public safety, professionalism, and service. Together, we can build something even stronger.

Daniel Monti
Chief of Staff



Daniel Monti
Chief of Staff

Behind the Badge:

Spotlight on Jeanette Thomas

Mrs. Thomas is an all-star. She is a 23-year veteran of the Illinois Department of Corrections and currently holds the title of Clinical Services Supervisor at Stateville Correctional Center. She's had many roles within the department, both security and non-security. What she enjoys most about her current job is learning from the multidisciplinary teams. The thing she dislikes about the job is the difficulty of unwinding after a workday. However, she is always looking to raise staff morale and put a smile on someone else's face.

Jeanette and her team assembled a hot chocolate bar for staff on Valentine's Day. Along with the hot cocoa, it boasted pastries, marshmallows, cookies, and candy, and maybe a hug or two, haha. She was able to decorate a cell house converted into office space into a space filled with beautiful hearts, balloons, and posters with sayings such as "Your well-being matters", "You matter", and "You are appreciated." Several staff members showed up and enjoyed the festivities.

Jeanette says, "It's not whether you get knocked down, it's whether you get up." When asked what inspires her to raise morale, she replied, "I am inspired by not EVER wanting someone to feel alone, as if they have no one to talk to or love them. We have lost too many officers to suicide. I will continue to combat suicide for as long as I am alive. I want to spread love, joy, and warm the hearts of my fellow co-workers."

Outside work, she enjoys family time with her husband, school-aged son, and two dogs. She also provides for an aunt and uncle. Her "get out of jail" hobbies include volunteering, helping others, swimming, reading, and cooking. Jeanette is also a valuable member of the Staff Wellness Response Team.



Motivational Quote of the Month

courtesy of Jonathan Brown,
SWRT Program Administrator

Train your mind to see
the good in everything.
Positivity is a choice.
The happiness of your
life depends on the
quality of your
thoughts.



My Culture in Corrections

by Melissa Levin

As a proud American with Pacific Islander roots, my journey as a correctional officer is a tale of two cultures. It is a narrative filled with the richness of heritage and the importance of my daily duty of upholding the standards of conduct. Growing up, my Pacific Islander family values inspired my respect for community, strength in unity, and a deep sense of justice. These values have been my compass in the demanding world of corrections. As an American, the ideals of freedom and equality that are the foundation of our nation drive me. In my role, I strive to embody these principles, ensuring that every individual's rights are protected by continuing to follow my policies and procedures to ensure safety and security for my community in and outside the facility.

I draw deeply from my Filipino heritage, especially the strong sense of community and *pamilya*, the Filipino word for family, influencing how I interact with my coworkers. My culture has taught me to respect others deeply, which shows in my everyday interactions with staff and individuals in custody. It's all about valuing others and treating everyone with kindness and consideration.

Again, respect and community are significant parts of Pacific Islander culture, and they guide how I interact with everyone inside the walls of my facility. That is a crucial factor in helping to create a more understanding and positive atmosphere. Plus, these cultural values push me to be professional in every setting. I always aim to uphold the highest standards of conduct, ensuring fairness, integrity, and respect in all my duties as a correctional officer and a strong female within my

community. My background shapes how I approach my work and strengthens my commitment to maintaining a disciplined and ethical environment.

I have faced moments where my cultural background was misunderstood or underestimated. Yet, these challenges have only strengthened my resolve to serve as a bridge between cultures, understanding, and respect in and out of the correctional setting.

As we celebrate and thank our Asian and Pacific Islander colleagues in corrections during this AAPI month, remember how valuable cultural representation is to our collective mission. Their efforts make a big difference in our daily operations and community.

Dimensions of Wellness: Physical

Welcome back, IDOC staff. I am here to talk about another dimension of wellness. I will be discussing the physical dimension. Physical dimensions include maintaining a healthy body through good nutrition, exercise, and ample sleep. Many in corrections stay physically active for many reasons. Some of those reasons are to keep on top of their health. Others are to stay in shape for the demands of the job. Many people work out or exercise to relieve stress and decompress between work and home. Whatever the reason is that drives you to exercise and live a healthy lifestyle doesn't matter because you are killing it.



Now, there may be some of you who are like me. We get wrapped up in life and don't make time to live a healthy physical lifestyle. Whether it is due to working at a desk and not really moving around, or sitting stagnant at your post and hardly having time to eat, let alone exercise, but then you have to run home to get ready for your kids' games, or cook supper, maybe help with homework, etc. The next thing you know, it is dark and time for bed—zero exercise for that day and many days after. You may be involved in so many after-school activities that you will not even have time to cook when you get home, so you grab fast food for yourself and the rest of the family. This may happen several times a week and leave out any healthy eating. How do you regain the healthy lifestyle you need and miss due to unwanted weight gain?

One way to work towards healthy eating is to stop buying junk food. Oh, I know, it tastes so good, but it is not beneficial to you. If junk food is not present in the house, there will be no temptation to consume it. Next, plan out your week. If you know you have many busy days in that week that will make it hard to cook from scratch, then you can pre-plan and prep food by making healthy meals for the whole week and freezing them until the day you need them. That morning, you can either put them in the crockpot on low so they are ready when you are home or thaw them out the night before so you can heat them when you arrive home. This way, you stay on track, and your family also benefits. Make sure you do your food prep and bring your lunch to work. Those state shots do not do anything for your healthy eating. Bring enough for the whole day, whether a small lunch with healthy snacks or a big lunch, you can eat a little all day. Don't forget to drink plenty of water. No pop and nothing with sugar in it. It will leave you sluggish by the end of your shift, not counting the damage it does to your body. Your body will thank you for it. Don't forget to take your vitamins and hydrate, hydrate, hydrate.

Now we will talk about the big E word: exercise! Many of us cringe when we hear that word, but you can't continue your healthy lifestyle without it. We all need at least 20 minutes of exercise a day—literally 20 minutes out of 24 hours. Start slow if it has been a while since you have done anything. Force yourself to take a 20-minute walk. Once you do that

for a few weeks, move it up to 30, and then 40. The same goes for any exercise you implement in your daily routine. You must put aside time for your self-care. Other types of exercises that you can start with are yoga, slow jogging, weightlifting, jump rope, riding a bike, swimming, or doing pushups/sit-ups. You don't have to join a gym or spend much money on equipment. These exercises are free, so get outside and enjoy the day.

Next is sleep. You need to aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep. To achieve this, you will need to establish a regular sleeping schedule. I know it is hard with all the extra activities after work or even working overtime. Try to go to bed and wake up

around the same time every day, even on weekends. Many will say, but I just can't sleep throughout the night because of my daily stress. How can I keep a sleeping schedule?

First, you will need to work on stress management. You can do this by practicing stress-reducing coping skills. Yoga is a great one to start with. Meditation, even just 15 minutes, will reduce your stress dramatically. You can also try deep breathing, journaling, spending more time outside or in nature, or looking up practical coping skills and trying them all until you find the one that works for you. Hobbies are also a great way to reduce stress. I enjoy my hobbies and keep my mind off all the stressful things from the day. This one is very effective for me. Spending quality time with my loved ones, whether family or friends, will also help take my mind off my troubles. Even if it's just sitting on the couch and watching a movie with them.

Now that we have worked on our stress management, we can start a bedtime routine to work towards that quality amount of sleep I was talking about. Limit screen time at least one hour before bed, including your phone. You can take a bath, read a book, or listen to calming music. Journaling or any writing will also help. These all will help promote relaxation, reduce stress, and calm your brain to aid in putting you into a deep sleep. It may take a few days of practicing a bedtime routine, but once you make it a daily routine, your body will adjust, and you will feel much better in the morning.

To complete your healthy lifestyle, get annual health check-ups. Depending on your age, you may have to add a few other check-ups in addition to yearly doctor appointments and a few blood tests, so you stay on track. It's better to get ahead of your health rather than trying to fix it later.

Now, are you going to join me on this journey? Follow these simple steps and see how we feel after a month, six months, or even a year. Set some goals and crush them! Once you crush them, set new ones. Stop making excuses and start moving. Talk to you next time with a new dimension. Stay safe.

Focusing on Wellness: “All Things You” Days Bring Support and Fun to Staff

The Staff Wellness Response Team (SWRT) brought “All Things You” to three IDOC facilities in March and April. These dedicated wellness days aim to support correctional staff’s well-being across IDOC. Events feature workshops centered on the eight dimensions of wellness, offering tools, resources, and hands-on activities to help staff prioritize their mental, emotional, and physical health.

Each facility tailored its event to create an engaging experience for staff:

- **Centralia Correctional Center** hosted its “All Things You” event on April 15. Staff enjoyed good smoked sausage and burgers, had friendly basketball competitions, and received wellness bags.



- **Hill Correctional Center** held its event on March 10. It featured a relaxing visit from therapy dogs and ping-pong games, creating a lighthearted and supportive environment.



- **Pinckneyville Correctional Center** joined in on March 25, with a day of “Minute to Win It” games, a putting green, popcorn, and ice cream. CMS’s Be Well program also joined the event, bringing resources and giveaways for staff.



These “All Things You” days are a fun and meaningful way to promote wellness and show appreciation for our frontline staff’s daily hard work. Stay tuned for an event at your facility!

Miss Bliss

Welcome back to another edition of Miss Bliss. It is great to be back! For those of you who have not heard about my articles, I like to write about issues that fellow corrections staff talk to me about. A few weeks ago, there was a Staff Wellness walk-through in a facility to see how staff are doing and what issues they may have. That is where we learned that low morale has become a big issue for most staff working there. They don't feel appreciated enough, they are not treated well, and everything we like about our jobs is gone. They are also overworked; some feel defeated due to the developing day-to-day issues. Some have started to fear coming to work because they don't know what they will face in an 8-hour shift.

How do we boost morale at work? Supervisors, this is where you are needed the most. Give out appreciation when needed, recognize our staff's hard work and accomplishments daily, and ensure they know they are valued. If the morale is high, the staff will learn to enjoy their jobs again and feel appreciated often. You don't have to recognize at roll call. Some people don't like the attention. Just tell them, "Hey, you all did a great job today. I know you are exhausted and worked hard like you do every day, but I want you to know that you all make the shift easier and better." Just a little bit of gratitude toward your staff is all they need to hear. Too often, we only hear when something is not done right, and we rarely hear how good a job we do.

You don't have to be an Administrator or a Supervisor to boost morale. Peers can also boost morale not only for their fellow peers but also for their supervisors. Staff always tell me how they appreciate what I do as a supervisor. It feels good to hear that, especially if you feel like you are failing your department. Positivity can also boost morale. We all know how working with positive people or like-minded people makes the day so much better than working with negative people. That positivity rubs off on others, so keep it up and be kind. Being kind is free! Spread that around. Just a smile or a good job is all some people need to make it through the day, and it doesn't take long.

How is your morale at home? Are you feeling so beaten down from the low morale at work that you are taking it home and spreading it around your family? The reasons why you go to work every day. If you answer yes, here are a few things you can do to boost morale at home. Gratitude. Be grateful for everything you have and the ones who are around you. Whether it is a spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, or even friends, show them gratitude. They also went to work or school and may have had a rough day. Don't take it out on them. Don't let them get the worst of you. Show them how grateful you are to have them, even if it is just a little hug, or ask how their day went. Many of us get so wrapped up in what we need to do next that we don't enjoy the simple moments with the ones we love and tend to forget that they also need to hear, "good job" or "I'm proud of you." Be active with your family. Not just quantity but also quality. Sitting on the couch watching TV or reels is not quality time with family. Yes, you



are there, but... are you? Go to their games. As much as our jobs make us want to stay home and away from anyone else, we still need to be active in their lives. Attend their plays, their gymnastic meets, their recitals, etc. Make memories for yourself and them, not regrets, and I wish I had's.

Be grateful for the ways you can provide for yourself and your family. Our jobs give us great pay to take family vacations, let kids be a part of some travel sport, braces or health care for our children and ourselves, and babies are essentially free with our insurance. In my past jobs before corrections, I struggled with caring for my children. Vacations were only every other year, and even then, they couldn't get the \$12 ice cream or souvenirs from the gift store. We were limited on what we could get at the local store during our weekly grocery trips. Doctor bills piled up, and school registrations were so stressful. I had to work tons of overtime to have the money to register my kids for school. I am so grateful for my job, even if it is sometimes tough, and I feel defeated. I can say, "I get to go to work, not I have to go to work." If you need extra money to make that already great trip with your family even better, you can take tons of overtime at any given time in security. You can pay off all the debt and work towards your children's and your future with or without it.

Giving yourself meaning is another way to boost your morale outside of work. How can you do that? Start a new hobby, do what you enjoy, and give yourself time alone for 15 to 30 minutes each day to relax and regroup. Whether trying new things or fixing things you should have fixed six or eight months ago, enjoy nature with just a walk on a trail, hunting, gardening, fishing, or even swimming. Get into an adult sport or be a coach. There are so many things out there that you can be a part of or do to make yourself happy and proud. Find those things and do them. Be thankful for the things outside the walls. You are more than just your job. You have a whole life, a whole family, and a whole world around you. If you blink too long, you just might miss it.

Until next time, enjoy life, keep your head up, and watch your back.

Facility History :

Stateville Correctional Center Overview

Welcome back to the second installment of our facility history series in Corrections Connections! This time, we examine one of Illinois' most storied institutions: Stateville Correctional Center. When many think of Stateville, the iconic roundhouse immediately comes to mind. But did you know the original facility included four circular housing units and one traditional long unit?

The idea for Stateville began in 1907, when the Illinois Legislature established "The Prison Commission" to select a site of at least 2,000 acres for a new state penitentiary. At the same time, reports surfaced detailing unsanitary and unsafe conditions at the Joliet Penitentiary, prompting calls for its closure. The plan was to replace Joliet's population with a new facility; thus, the concept for Stateville was born.

Three administrators were sent to Europe to study prison designs as part of the planning process. They were particularly interested in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, an innovative 18th-century concept emphasizing visibility and supervision. Rather than isolating individuals, the Panopticon design placed them in a circular arrangement around a central observation tower, allowing one officer to monitor the entire unit.

Illinois State Architect W. Carby Zimmerman, appointed by Governor Deneen, was tasked with the facility's design. Though he never explicitly referenced the term Panopticon, Zimmerman embraced its core design principles. The main ideas featured in his 1912 plans claimed to prioritize sunshine in every cell, centralized supervision, and improved health conditions with cells utilizing separate heating and ventilation.

Construction began in August 1916, with much of the labor provided by individuals in custody. The original buildings included an administration building, a connected central dining hall, four circular housing units (C, D, E, and F Houses), and one long four-tier unit, B House, divided into two sections. While the initial plan called for a fifth roundhouse, B House replaced it due to budget limitations.

Stateville Correctional Center officially opened its doors in 1925, with John L. Whitman serving as the facility's first warden. The opening of Stateville did not result in the closure of Joliet Penitentiary as planned, which remained operational until 2002.



Photos above courtesy of Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

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One of Stateville's most notable architectural features is Unit B—the longest cell house in the world. Measuring 420 feet long, with five tiers and two sides, it connects to four roundhouses that once branched off a central rotunda. Walking through the rotunda today, you can still see architectural remnants of early Stateville. The facility is surrounded by a 35-foot-high wall stretching 6,750 feet, enclosing approximately 65 acres. The wall was completed in the summer of 1920, though construction on the rest of the facility continued for several years.

We spoke with several long-serving staff members to better understand how the facility evolved. What is now known as X House is actually two buildings constructed throughout the years. The original structure, Stateville Orientation and Segregation, was built in 1914. It has three floors and once served as the site for executions. The adjoining one-story structure, built sometime in the 1920s, was historically called the Stateville Special Cellhouse.

G Dorm was added in 1937. In the early 1980s, Roundhouses C and D were torn down. At that time, B Complex was divided into B-West and B-East, and H and I Houses were constructed in 1982 to replace the lost housing units. In the early 1990s, D House was also demolished, leaving F House as the last standing roundhouse. F House remained in use until it was closed in 2016, holding the distinction as the last operational roundhouse in the U.S. and the world. It briefly reopened during the COVID-19 pandemic but was quickly shuttered again.

In 1955, Stateville underwent a major facility remodel. Then, between 1996 and 1997, B-West and B-East were converted into four distinct housing units—B, C, D, and E. In its earlier years, the facility also operated a fully functioning farm with horses and cattle, providing food and work opportunities for individuals in custody.

Stateville Correctional Center has a long, storied past that history will never forget. One of the more controversial chapters in Stateville's history occurred during and after World War II, when the prison became a site for a military-sponsored malaria research project. Incarcerated individuals were deliberately infected with malaria and treated with experimental drugs, some of which caused severe side effects. Participants were not just subjects; they acted as lab technicians and secretaries, recorded data, administered mosquito bites and treatments, and helped determine project eligibility. Some were granted early parole in exchange for their involvement. This research, carried out by academic and



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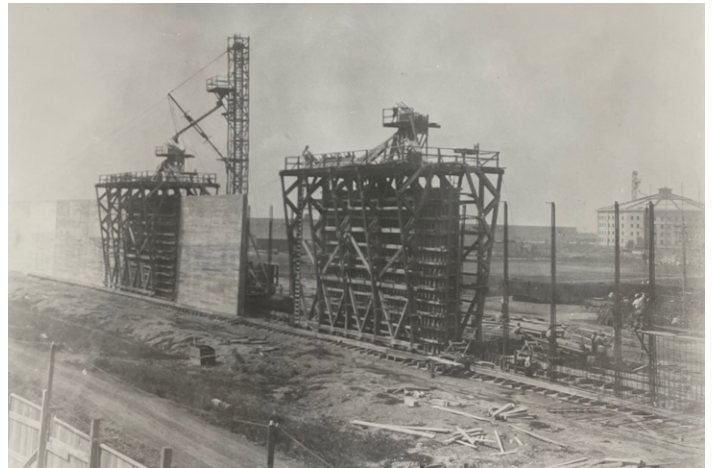
military scientists, continued until sometime between 1973 and 1976, when the federal government banned research on prisoners.

Over the years, Stateville also became a well-known filming location, lending its architecture and history to several Hollywood productions. Notable films shot at the facility include *Call Northside 777* (1948), *Bad Boys* (1983), *Weeds* (1987), *Red Heat* (1988), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and, most recently, Netflix's upcoming season of *Monsters*.

The last individual in custody was transferred out of Stateville Correctional Center on March 15, 2025, nearly 100 years after it officially opened. Under the leadership of Warden Charles Truitt, the closure marked the end of an era. Reflecting on the moment, Warden Truitt said:

"Challenging, rewarding, unprecedented, remarkable, humbling... It has been an absolute honor to begin and end my career here. Nothing compares to what we do at Stateville. Some may not understand the dynamics, but this work cannot be done without the support and trust of great staff."

Thank you to all who contributed to gathering and preserving this history. We sincerely appreciate your dedication to Stateville's legacy.



Department Updates

Updates from the Executive Team:

The Department's transition from Securus phone services and GTL tablet and video visit services to ICSolutions for technology services continues. At this point, most facilities have transitioned to the ICSolutions system on kiosks, phones, and tablets. The rollout is entering the next phase, where additional features will be created and enabled. New features will include, but are not limited to, phone calls capabilities and Edovo educational platform on tablets, Fast Case Law Library on tablets and kiosks, and reinforcing the WiFi network. Thank you to all facilities for your patience, effort, and feedback throughout this transition.

Updates from the Women and Family Services Division:

New Administrators- There are two new administrators: Warden Jaclyn Thompson at Decatur CC and Assistant Warden of Operations Jason Lawrence at Logan CC were appointed on 4/1/25.

Graduations- Two residents will earn their master's degrees this May and are set to participate in commencement ceremonies at North Park College and Northwestern University.

Staff Highlight- During a transport from Logan CC to Fox Valley ATC, Corrections Residence Counselor I McGill safely navigated a hit-and-run incident. CRCI McGill responded swiftly and effectively to ensure the safety and security of all individuals in custody.

Fox Valley ATC- Nearly 25% of Fox Valley ATC residents are employed in managerial roles, leading teams of up to 15 employees. These residents are also entrusted with opening and closing businesses, as well as handling bank deposits. On average, residents at Fox Valley ATC save over \$15,000 during their stay. Notably, one current resident has accumulated nearly \$80,000 in savings. A newly implemented computer lab now provides residents with secure access to designated internet resources focused on key reintegration areas, including employment and housing opportunities.



"In the Spotlight" is a tribute to the exceptional leaders across IDOC who make a meaningful difference through their leadership. This feature highlights individuals who demonstrate dedication, innovation, and a strong commitment to building a supportive environment. By showcasing their achievements, we aim to inspire others and emphasize the vital role strong leadership plays in shaping our department's culture. Each spotlight serves as a reminder of our team members' extraordinary efforts to strengthen our mission and improve the lives of those we serve.

In the Spotlight: **Warden Brittney Greene, Western Illinois Correctional Center**

Warden Brittney Greene has made significant contributions to the field of corrections since she began her career with IDOC in 2011. A graduate of MacMurray College in Jacksonville, where she double majored in Criminal Justice and Psychology, Warden Greene has utilized her educational background and personal experiences growing up in a law enforcement family to forge a successful path in community service and correctional management.

Warden Greene's career commenced as a substance abuse counselor at Jacksonville Correctional Center, where she quickly recognized the importance of providing support and rehabilitation to individuals facing substance use challenges. With a commitment to professional development, she diligently worked toward obtaining her certification from the Illinois Certification Board, becoming a Certified Alcohol and Other Drug Counselor. Her dedication did not go unnoticed, and she was rapidly promoted to Program Director, playing a pivotal role in transitioning the Greene Work Camp into an Impact Incarceration Program. This program focused on providing comprehensive substance abuse treatment alongside custody services, reflecting her belief in the power of rehabilitation.

In addition to her work with IDOC, Warden Greene also served as a part-time police officer for Waverly. This dual role allowed her to gain valuable insights and experience in law enforcement, further enhancing her understanding of community safety and correctional processes. Completing nine months of training and graduating from the Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board (LETAC) in 2019, she demonstrated her commitment to law enforcement excellence.

In 2020, Warden Green became an Assistant Warden of Programs at IDOC, overseeing various departmental functions, including Clinical Services, Mental Health, Healthcare, Leisure Time Activities, and Identification Services. Her exceptional leadership and advocacy for effective programs led to her promotion as Warden of Western Illinois Correctional Center and Clayton County Work Camp in 2021.



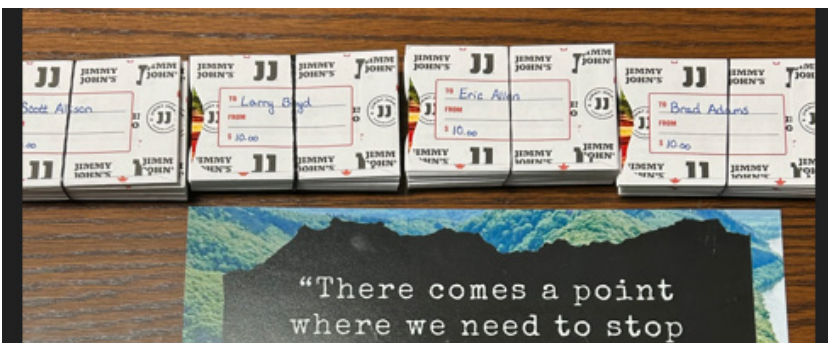
Warden Greene is particularly known for her staff-oriented approach in her current role. She prioritizes the safety and well-being of her team, fostering an environment where staff feel supported and valued. Her leadership style, centered on collaboration and professional growth, has cultivated a positive culture within the facility.

Warden Brittney Greene's journey reflects a deep commitment to community service, rehabilitation, and advancing correctional practices. Through her various roles, she has not only influenced the individual lives of those in her care but also contributed to the broader mission of promoting safer communities through effective correctional strategies. As she continues to lead Western Illinois Correctional Center, her achievements inspire future leaders in the field.

IDOC Celebrates National Correctional Officers and Staff Week with Gratitude, Games, and Giving Back

From May 4–11, facilities across IDOC came together to honor our dedicated team during National Correctional Officers and Staff Week. The week was filled with appreciation, celebration, and activities that recognized the vital contributions of our staff in all roles.

At **Peoria Adult Transition Center**, the facility administration showed their appreciation with a personal touch. All staff members received individualized goodie bags filled with candy, snacks, pens, keychains, and ID holders. Shift Commanders also provided meals for their respective teams, ensuring everyone felt recognized and supported throughout the week.



Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center partnered with AFSCME Local 3654 to honor staff and raise awareness for Mental Health Month. Staff wore green ribbon wristbands in solidarity, promoting the importance of mental health and the resources available through the Staff Wellness Response Team (SWRT) and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). More than 30 staff members also signed up to donate blood and plasma, going above and beyond to demonstrate compassion and community service.



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At **Decatur Correctional Center**, the week was all about fun and camaraderie. Staff entered a contest with unlimited entries for a chance to throw a customized pie in the face of department heads and Deputy Director Locke. Events throughout the week included a pizza party hosted by Warden Thompson and AWP Williams, a nacho and taco bar with outdoor games provided by the local union, a 3–11 shift celebration with Bingo, and a barbecue with smoked pork and cookies. Staff also enjoyed board games and basketball contests during their breaks.



Across the state, our facilities celebrated the incredible dedication of our correctional professionals with creativity, generosity, and gratitude. Thank you to every team member for your tireless service and commitment to excellence.

Pinckneyville Correctional Center Hosts Wellness Day with Retiree Support

Pinckneyville Correctional Center recently held its “All Things You” wellness event, welcoming back retirees to support staff and activities. Among them was retired Major William Lawless, who spent the day reconnecting with former colleagues, assisting with meals, and offering guidance to newer staff members.

His presence underscored the strong sense of community within the correctional workforce. The event highlighted the importance of wellness and collaboration and demonstrated how retired staff continue to make meaningful contributions long after their service ends. Pinckneyville’s commitment to supporting both current and former employees fosters a positive, united workplace culture.



Honoring Excellence at the 2025 ICEMA Ceremony

On May 6, the Illinois Correctional Employees' Memorial Association (ICEMA) hosted its Annual Memorial Wall Service in Springfield. The ceremony honored the memory of fallen IDOC and IDJJ heroes and served as an opportunity to recognize our outstanding staff for their dedication and service.

We are proud to congratulate the recipients of the 2025 Employee of the Year awards. These individuals exemplify the values of commitment, professionalism, and service that define the Illinois Department of Corrections.

- Correctional Officer of the Year: Officer Kirk Richards, Vienna Correctional Center
- Parole Agents of the Year: Agent Jamie Harris and Agent Dawn Sollars, Sex Offender Supervision Unit, District 2

- General Office Employee of the Year: Jessica Cunningham, Statewide Field Services Coordinator
- Facility Employee of the Year: Jill Freeman, Executive Secretary III, Illinois River Correctional Center

Congratulations to these deserving honorees and to all the 2025 nominees. Your work is essential to the safety and success of our facilities and communities across the state. Thank you for your exceptional contributions and continued service.

We also extend our appreciation to ICEMA for hosting another meaningful and memorable ceremony.



Officer Kirk Richards, Correctional Officer of the Year



Jill Freeman, Facility Employee of the Year



Jessica Cunningham, General Office Employee of the Year



Agents Jamie Harris and Dawn Sollars, Parole Agents of the Year

2025 Nominations for Correctional Officer of the Year

Gabrielle Bertin, Correctional Officer, Vandalia Correctional Center
Bradley Bowen, Correctional Officer, Western Illinois Correctional Center
Austin Campbell, Correctional Officer, Danville Correctional Center
Kimoreyettia Coffee, Correctional Treatment Officer, Joliet Treatment Center/Joliet Inpatient Treatment Center
Timothy Corn, Correctional Officer, Big Muddy River Correctional Center
Richard Cravens, Correctional Officer, Robinson Correctional Center
Matthew Curtis, Corrections Residence Counselor I, Peoria Adult Transition Center
Tyler Dagen, Correctional Officer, Decatur Correctional Center
Lisa Ellinger, Correctional Officer, Illinois River Correctional Center
Rachel England, Correctional Officer, Jacksonville Correctional Center
Eric Ferguson, Correctional Lieutenant, Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center
James Ferry II, Correctional Officer, Lincoln Correctional Center
Zachary Gonzalez, Correctional Officer, Graham Correctional Center
Othello Hamilton, Correctional Sergeant, Stateville Correctional Center
David Hochmuth, Correctional Officer, Menard Correctional Center
Taylir Humes, Correctional Officer, Hill Correctional Center
Jonathan Kelly, Corrections Residence Counselor I, Fox Valley Adult Transition Center
Tyler Leach, Correctional Officer, East Moline Correctional Center
Michael Lecuyer, Correctional Officer, Sheridan Correctional Center
Aaryn Mercer, Correctional Officer, Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center
Aaron Musgrave, Correctional Officer, Lawrence Correctional Center
Adrian Pearson, Correctional Sergeant, Dixon Correctional Center
Lori Rath, Correctional Officer, Shawnee Correctional Center
Cassie Rennick, Correctional Lieutenant, Logan Correctional Center
Kirk Richards, Correctional Officer, Vienna Correctional Center
Angel Smith, Corrections Residence Counselor I, North Lawndale Adult Transition Center
Jeremy Thole, Correctional Officer, Centralia Correctional Center
Joanne Thomas, Correctional Officer, Taylorville Correctional Center
Benjamin Weller, Correctional Officer, Pontiac Correctional Center
Jonathan Wilson, Correctional Officer, Pinckneyville Correctional Center/Murphysboro Life Skills Re-Entry Center

2025 Nominations for Parole Agent of the Year

Sarah Brake, Parole Agent, District 5
Mario Catarnicchia, Parole Agent, District 3
Jamie Harris, Parole Agent, District 2
Zach Payne, Parole Agent, District 4
Dawn Sollars, Parole Agent, District 2
Heather Williams, Parole Agent, District 1

2025 Nominations for General Office Employee of the Year

Amy Burle, District 2 Re-Entry Supervisor
Erik Cozzolino, Human Resources Specialist, Classifications
Amanda Hardwick, Sourcing Executive II
Jessica Mayhew, Southern Region Re-Entry Manager
Jessica (Sullivan) Cunningham, Statewide Field Service Coordinator
Lisa Weitekamp, Administrative Review Board Manager
Thomas White, Executive Secretary II, Office of Health Services

2025 Nominations for Facility Employee of the Year

Jimmy Afolabi, Social Worker II, Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center
Jason Baer, Correctional Counselor II, Danville Correctional Center
Amy Barbeau, Administrative Assistant II, Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center
Kimberly Beard, Office Associate, Taylorville Correctional Center
Jennifer Carter, Food Service Program Manager, Dixon Correctional Center
Jill Freeman, Executive Secretary III, Illinois River Correctional Center
Linda Froelke, Office Associate, Sheridan Correctional Center
Andres Gonzalez, Correctional Food Service Supervisor II, East Moline Correctional Center
James Gosnell, Corrections Leisure Activity Specialist II, Lawrence Correctional Center
James 'Bob' Hall, Correctional Counselor II, Shawnee Correctional Center
Ethan Haney, Correctional Sergeant, Vienna Correctional Center
Chris Henzler, Leisure Time Services Supervisor, Western Illinois Correctional Center
Rina Martinez-Bates, Corrections Assessment Specialist, Hill Correctional Center
Callissa Miller, Account Technician I, Robinson Correctional Center
Michele Miller, Health Care Unit Administrator, Joliet Treatment Center/Joliet Inpatient Treatment Center
Nneka Muhammad, Corrections Residence Counselor, Peoria Adult Transition Center
Melody Oelschlager, Administrative Assistant I, Pontiac Correctional Center
Greg Ramsey, Corrections Supply Supervisor II, Big Muddy River Correctional Center
Amy Rude, Social Worker IV, Decatur Correctional Center
Colleen Runge, Office Administrative Specialist, Menard Correctional Center
Angela Scarber, Human Resources Associate, Pinckneyville Correctional Center/Murphysboro Life Skills Re-Entry Center
Lorraine Seaman, Correctional Counselor II, Stateville Correctional Center
Leah Smith, Correctional Counselor II, Fox Valley Adult Transition Center
Courtney Spencer, Office Administrator II, Centralia Correctional Center
Lacy Stock, Executive Secretary I, Vandalia Correctional Center
Christopher Strohbeck, Office Administrator III, Lincoln Correctional Center
Paula Sumpter, Executive Secretary I, Jacksonville Correctional Center
Sarah Taapken, Corrections Assessment Specialist, Logan Correctional Center
Scheryl Walton, Facility Review Control Officer, Crossroads Adult Transition Center
Dee White-Smith, Administrative Assistant to the Center Supervisor, North Lawndale Adult Transition Center
Robbie Wise, Corrections Food Service Supervisor II, Graham Correctional Center



Mother's Day Perspective *by Crystal Robertson*

As Mother's Day approaches every year, it is met with happiness and pride in how my kiddos have turned out. In the same breath, it can also be met with an overwhelming sense of loss and sadness. One might ask how one day can have two different emotions. Let me share a little bit of my story in hopes of helping someone else.

I grew up with the absolute best mother around. She was a stay-at-home and devoted her whole life to my brother and me. She could outcook anyone in the world and spent her life ensuring my brother and I had everything we needed. Our relationship grew stronger when I brought my first child into the world. My firstborn did not come easily or naturally. I fought for five years to be able to be a mom. Thankfully, with some skilled doctors and access to amazing science at my fingertips, I became pregnant with three babies. In the end, I was only able to deliver one of those babies, a healthy baby boy. When my son came home, my bond with my mother only strengthened. She could answer my ever-growing list of questions that come with first-time moms. Even though my questions were exhausting, my mom never let on. She would calm me and assure me I was doing great in my new role as a mom. I always say my mother was the only person I know who would qualify for the title of a Saint.

After having an emergency surgery, leaving me unable to have any more children, I turned to adoption to complete my family. I brought home a healthy 8-year-old little boy to my family. With adoption, there come different obstacles and emotions on Mother's Day. My little guy had three moms in his life. He had his biological and foster mom, and now he has his forever mom, ME! All the while, I am so blessed to be the mom of this child, my heart aches knowing that he may never know

his biological mom. His heart broke, and his world shattered the day I showed up to bring him home. The trauma we work through as a family due to the way he became my son is not lost on me. I am reminded daily of how blessed and grateful I am to have him call me his forever mom. I celebrate that his previous moms chose a better life for him and spend my Mother's Day celebrating their selflessness.

Here comes the part of my life that has shaped me into who I am today. My mother was diagnosed, very unexpectedly, with stage 4 cancer. By the time she was diagnosed, there was nothing anyone could do to extend her life. She passed away a week and a half later. The devastation this caused in my life is still indescribable. And as I am typing this story, it still shakes me to the core. No one can understand this type of loss unless they have already joined the club that no one wants to join, the motherless club. So, on Mother's Day, I try to focus on having three healthy, successful boys who call me Mom. I celebrate having women step up and guide me as my mother would.

If Mother's Day is a struggle for you, please know I see you. I know the list goes on to list other reasons why Mother's Day might be a struggle for someone. Just know you are not alone in this. Please understand that when dealt a hand that is a struggle, it only makes you stronger. It also helps equip you to be able to share and help others. I hope this story helps someone who might be struggling to celebrate. I pray that you can find something good to celebrate on a day that is hard for you.



Memorial Day: A Personal Reflection *by Sergeant John Howard*

I'm not writing this to tell you the history of Memorial Day. I am writing this on behalf of any active, reserve, or National Guard service member, veteran, or family member/friend of a service member who experienced, or is experiencing, the loss of a loved one who served.

Between the mattress sales, barbecues, and pool openings, there are those of us who take Memorial Day a different way. It is a time of reflection and remembrance for those who served and are no longer with us. Specialist Michael Karr has not attended a barbecue since he died in Iraq on March 31st, 2004. Captain Matthew August will not be able to buy a new, on-sale mattress to sleep comfortably next to his wife because he died in Iraq on January 27th, 2004. I served 23 years in the Army and retired this past July. I can function better at my job in the IDOC because of training and serving alongside Soldiers like SPC Karr and CPT August.

It's not all doom and gloom. There is no need to protest your local pool or not have a gathering to enjoy the day. Often, a silent group has difficulty doing these activities or gets angry if someone says "Happy Memorial Day" to them. If it weren't for the support of close friends and family, I would still have significant issues dealing with survivor's guilt, cyclical depression, and PTSD over the number of military brothers, sisters, and family members who died.

My grandfather served in the Korean War and is buried in a military cemetery in my hometown. I walk among the tombstones and see the coins left on top. It's part of a little-known tradition outside of military service members. A penny means that someone visited the grave. A nickel if the person who visited the grave went to boot camp with the service member. A dime represents that a person served with the deceased member. A quarter on the headstone means that the person who visited was there when that person died. I'm grateful that I could spend time with my grandfather and continue to honor his legacy.

This tradition also extends to military cemeteries overseas. I had the privilege of helping clean headstones in a WWI cemetery in France in 2023 for a Memorial Day ceremony. As I scrubbed a year's worth of dirt and grime from the markers, I felt the impact of that moment in time, even though there was over a hundred-year difference between when we served. I saw many volunteers crying for people they had never met, and kids participating in an activity with their parents as a lesson in respect for a legacy left behind.

Armed Forces Day, the second Saturday in May, is for those currently serving. Veterans Day, November 11th, is for those still alive but no longer serving in the military. Let those days be about those people. Let Memorial Day be the day of remembrance and honor for those who have passed.

In conclusion, I'm grateful to be able to use my life experiences to assist and empathize with others. I've participated in almost all the wellness programs IDOC offers. Attending things like CF2F or the All Things You workshops is highly encouraged to learn about what resources are in place to help. Working in the IDOC can be challenging, but thanks to programs like the Staff Wellness Response Team, steps are being taken in the right direction to help find solutions.

I encourage each of you to participate in established traditions or find your own way to honor the legacy of those we remember on Memorial Day. Have a safe holiday inside and beyond the wall.

Sergeant John Howard
Staff Wellness
Danville Correctional Center
US Army Retired



Perfect Pitch: Me *by Anonymous*

I was born in Northern England in 1968, to a working-class community where we pride ourselves on being hard workers and avid, if not obsessive, football (British) supporters. From an early age, all I was interested in was sports. My family still jokes that I could kick a ball before walking. I played every sport through school and college and played for a travel football team at 11. Back then, girls were not allowed to play football in school; only boys were allowed to play, so if you wanted to play on a girls' team, you had to be invited to play on a women's travel team. Every day after school, I played football with all the neighborhood boys in our local park. All my friends were boys, and all my interests were in sports, especially football.

Growing up in the 70s and 80s was a blur: school, football, school, and football. I didn't even know what "gay" was, even though most of the women that I played on a team with were in relationships with each other. I was much younger than them all, and they protected me fiercely. I felt like I had 11 mothers, and I was their child. The only homosexual people I came across were characters on TV shows. And as a child, I didn't understand the concept; I just understood my dad's objections to such characters on the shows we watched as a family.

Once I realized my sexuality, around age 13 or 14, it scared me, as I knew how my parents felt regarding homosexuals. Both my mum and dad were raised in Christian church going families, raised to believe homosexuality was a sin. At such a young age, in the early 80s, there were no such things as helplines, counselors, or support groups. I ignored my feelings and continued playing sports, which, thankfully, helped me. I was raised to believe in God and was involved in the church from a young age. My perception of God was that he loved everyone, regardless of color, religion, where you came from, or who you loved. I had faith that God had made me how I was supposed to be.

Like most people, I have had struggles with my faith, especially once my parents found out I was gay. We had a long period when we did not speak, and I was estranged from both my parents. I always returned to the reality that God made me this way for a reason. I worked hard, continued to play football, and persevered with support from other families. My parents raised me with good work ethics, and I even understood how hard it was for them. Eventually, with help from other family and friends, my parents saw me for who I was. The daughter they raised me to be. I didn't drink, or smoke, or do drugs. I had a good government job. I treated people with respect and kindness. I just happened to like girls and not boys.

My advice for anyone struggling with their faith and sexual orientation is to believe in yourself and God's values. Be kind, respect everyone, help people in need, and always try to do the right thing. No one person is perfect. We all have faults and struggles, but we were all put on the earth for a reason. Find your reason and be decent to all people.

Spectrum of Compassion

by Kelly Overton

Being a parent can be both a challenge and a joy, and being the parent of a child on the Autism Spectrum is no different. Like all children, there are unique challenges/hurdles to overcome. Symptoms of Autism can vary from person to person; however, in my experience, most have a set of unique mannerisms, thought processes, and characteristics. Some of these are:

- Problems in social interaction with others.
- Unusual interest in objects/topics.
- Need for sameness.
- Great variation in abilities.
- Under or overreaction to one or more of the five senses: sight, touch, taste, smell, or hearing.
- Repeated actions or body movements.

For my son, Alistair, who is eight years old and is diagnosed with level 2 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) this looks like getting emotionally overwhelmed, hitting, throwing things, squeezing other's arms hard, pinching, shoving, verbal threats, flapping his hands and arms, repetitive speech, known as echolalia, and sometimes uncontrollable crying. But this also looks like hugs, "I love you, Mommy", talking to everyone he meets, asking them questions, a memory like I've never seen before, and powerful intelligence. Yes, I'm his mom, so I may be a little biased, but I think those who know him would agree that this is a pretty accurate view.

When his schedule changes, such as a weekend visit to Grandma and Grandpa's house, he repeatedly ponders the same questions: "Are we going to Grandma and Grandpa's house?", "Are we going Friday?", "Are we going to have a sleepover?" to help him process this change and regulate his thoughts and feelings about it. He doesn't just say, "I'm anxious about spending the weekend at their house," he shows it in these behaviors.

The other day, Alistair, his sister, Fae Anne, and I were playing tag, and I'm the one who was 'It'. I already tagged out Alistair and was chasing Fae, who was screaming as I chased her, when Alistair came up behind me and struck me in the back multiple times. Alistair hitting me was his way of trying to communicate that he was overwhelmed by how loud his sister was being. I can only assume his thought process is, "If mom stops chasing Sissy, then she'll stop screaming," hence the hitting to get me to stop. I turned around and said, "Alistair, are you overwhelmed? Do we need to stop playing for a minute?" He said "yes," and we just needed to sit and snuggle for a few minutes, then he was up and ready to play again. Now, of course, hitting is not okay, so we have a conversation about how it physically and emotionally hurts me when he does that and talk about other ways, he can get a break from the game when he is overwhelmed, i.e., saying "timeout" or "I need a break." My husband and I also realized that going up to his room by himself and playing with Alexa (yes, the AI



Alexa), watching television, or playing on his tablet helps him calm down. Alexa answers all his questions without getting frustrated like people do. It is to the point where, occasionally, he will do this on his own or ask to be taken upstairs and set up in his room. That's our cue that he needs a break. Now, all of that didn't happen overnight. I've been working with him since he was little on recognizing emotions, blowing bubbles for deep breathing, and other ways to calm down, express his feelings, and recognize emotions in others. I guess that's what you get having a therapist for a mom. He also received and continues to receive occupational, physical, and speech therapy since age three. It's been a work in progress.

Something that I've noticed over my ten years in corrections as a therapist and now assessment specialist is that whether the individuals are diagnosed with ASD or not, we see similar behaviors to the symptoms mentioned above. I've also encountered staff who are dealing with similar struggles. I consider myself far from perfect; however, one of the things I try to do every day is treat others with kindness and have the perspective that they are human beings trying to get their needs met the best way they know how with my son that means trying to understand what he is communicating through his behaviors that otherwise would seem to be belligerent and defiant when really, they are communicating his frustration, confusion, and eagerness to be able to communicate with others.

To be heard and understood is a normal expectation and what most other human beings also want. When working in corrections, we see a lot of behaviors. Some are very disturbing, and some we're desensitized to. All are a form of communication. If we were to hear and understand the message that the person is trying to convey through behavior or words, this would help others feel heard, reduce violent behaviors, increase healthy coping, and promote effective communication. When you approach any person with an open mind, they are more willing to listen to what you say.

Since my son was officially diagnosed at age five, I've lived with the fear of how others are going to respond to him and his behavioral quirks. The things he says and does could easily be seen as challenges to authority for those unfamiliar with

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him. What happens when he is driving, if he gets his driver's license, and is pulled over by an officer and questions "why" to that authority figure like he does to everyone else so often? Will he get in trouble because he is being seen as defiant? Will he end up in jail or prison because he doesn't understand or is around others who convince him to do something wrong? He is a bit gullible, but maybe he'll grow out of it. Or an officer tries to restrain him, and he gets aggressive because he is scared? We all have fears for our children as parents. Maybe these are normal, relatable fears for anyone with children.

I tell myself often, "Thank God Alistair doesn't see the looks he gets from other people or picks up on what their face says they think of him." Which, to me, can be a blessing

or a curse with someone on the spectrum. The ability to not be aware of what others think of you can also hinder effective communication. I hope he will encounter people who are open and understanding throughout his life. That will look past the behaviors and the awkwardness and come to know the wonderful, loving person that he is. Someone has already coined the phrase, "Be Kind," but it is so fitting when interacting with someone on the Autism Spectrum and people in general. So, I encourage you to be kind. You don't know what is written on the pages of someone else's story. Different doesn't always equate to bad. Thank you for reading my thoughts and experience with my "best boy", Alistair.



The Prevalence of Autism and Modern Advocacy

by Trevor Goodrum

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by a range of challenges in social interaction, communication, and behavior. Over the past few decades, there has been an observable increase in the reported prevalence of autism. This rise has prompted significant changes in public awareness and advocacy efforts, leading to more inclusive societal approaches. This rise is visible in many of our communities. I know because my son is on the spectrum as well.

The Prevalence of Autism

The prevalence of autism has increased significantly in recent decades. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the prevalence of ASD has risen from 1 in 150 children in 2000 to 1 in 36 children in 2023.¹ While some argue that this rise is due to better diagnostic tools and increased awareness, others contend that environmental or societal factors may also contribute to the growing numbers. In truth, the spectrum is so broad that we may never know precisely why it seems to be on the rise. Also, more and more parents are going through what I went through. Many

of us always think it won't happen to our kids, until it does. I remember locking myself in my bathroom and crying for hours after my son's diagnosis. I was worried about the challenges he would face. What kind of life could he lead? However, once I started educating myself on ASD, I saw there were multiple avenues to take to get him the help he needed.

One of the primary factors influencing the increased prevalence of autism is better awareness and understanding of the disorder. Like many others throughout our childhood and before, children with ASD went undiagnosed, as symptoms were either misunderstood or overlooked. As knowledge of the condition has expanded, more individuals are being identified early, allowing for earlier interventions. This shift has likely contributed to a higher reported prevalence, though it does not necessarily mean that autism is occurring more frequently than before. Improved diagnostic criteria have also played a significant role. The publication of the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2013, which broadened the definition of autism to encompass a broader range of symptoms, further increased the number of diagnoses.²

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¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). *Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder*. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs>

²American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.)*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

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Environmental factors, such as prenatal and perinatal conditions, may also be influencing the rise in autism rates. Several studies have pointed to a potential link between advanced parental age, maternal health, and autism.³ It is relatively common to see people having children at a later age than what was traditionally the norm. Additionally, exposure to environmental toxins, changes in dietary patterns, and other factors might play a role, though the evidence for these links remains inconclusive. However, these studies suggest that a combination of genetic and environmental factors could contribute to the observed increase in autism diagnoses.

The Challenges in Understanding and Diagnosing Autism

Despite the rise in autism diagnoses, understanding the exact causes and nature of the disorder remains challenging. ASD is a spectrum disorder, meaning that individuals with autism can exhibit a wide range of symptoms and abilities. Very rarely do you find two people on the spectrum who are exactly alike. This variability complicates diagnosis and treatment, as each person with autism may experience different challenges. Early diagnosis is essential for providing appropriate interventions, but identifying autism in very young children can be difficult. Symptoms may not be evident until later in childhood, and mild forms of autism may go undiagnosed for years. I can't say enough how crucial it is to get a diagnosis as early as possible if you suspect that a loved one may be on the spectrum. Thanks to my son's early diagnosis, we were able to get him immediately into speech therapy and occupational therapy. It took a couple of months to notice, but suddenly, we could see him advancing. He was able to talk more coherently. His fine motor skills began to improve. We were able to start helping more with his behaviors.

The complexity of autism is further compounded by the fact that there is no single definitive test for the condition. Diagnosis typically relies on behavioral observations, developmental history, and input from parents and caregivers, which can be a very frustrating part of the process. I took my son to numerous appointments in multiple locations. It takes a team of experts to conduct the tests to determine if someone is on the spectrum. And you must hope that the medical professional is good with kids. We want to think that would always be the case, but it isn't. The reliance on subjective assessments can lead to inconsistencies in diagnosis, particularly in cases where the symptoms are less noticeable. In recent years, however, advances in neuroimaging and genetic research have opened new avenues for understanding the neurological and genetic underpinnings of autism. Research has shown that structural

and functional differences in the brain may contribute to the characteristic behaviors of individuals with ASD.⁴

Modern Advocacy: Shifting Perspectives on Autism

As the prevalence of autism continues to rise, so does the need for effective advocacy. Autism advocacy has evolved significantly over the years, transitioning from a focus on medical treatments and cures to a broader emphasis on acceptance, inclusion, and support for individuals with ASD. Modern advocacy groups focus on raising awareness, improving access to services, and promoting social inclusion for individuals on the autism spectrum. We know that there isn't a "cure" for ASD. However, there are treatments, therapies, and regimens to help someone navigate the disorder. This is why the focus is more on awareness and inclusion. However, we still have a long way to go regarding services. But we will talk about that shortly.

The neurodiversity movement, which has gained traction in recent years, challenges the traditional medical model of autism. Instead of viewing autism as a disorder that needs to be fixed, neurodiversity advocates argue that autism is a natural variation of the human condition. They emphasize the importance of acceptance, respect, and providing accommodations to help individuals with autism thrive in society. This shift in perspective has led to greater emphasis on inclusive education, employment opportunities, and accessibility for individuals with ASD.

Another key aspect of modern autism advocacy is the push for better services and support for individuals with ASD across the lifespan. While much of the focus has traditionally been on early intervention and support for children with autism, advocates are increasingly calling for services that extend into adulthood. Many individuals with autism face challenges in transitioning to independent living, finding employment, and accessing appropriate healthcare as they grow older. Organizations like the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) work to ensure that the needs of adults with autism are not overlooked. ASAN, founded by individuals with autism, emphasizes self-determination and empowerment, advocating for policies that promote independent living, employment, and full participation in society for people on the autism spectrum.⁵ Generally, services stop after the person turns 18. There are so few services for adults with ASD that it can be discouraging to try to find them any help that they may need. This still keeps me awake at night.

The rise in autism awareness has also led to significant legislative changes. In the United States, the passage of the Autism CARES Act in 2019 authorized funding for

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³Durkin, M. S., Maenner, M. J., & Newschaffer, C. J. (2008). Advanced parental age and the risk of autism spectrum disorder. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 162(2), 176–181. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpediatrics.2007.49>

⁴Courchesne, E., Campbell, K., & Solso, S. (2011). Brain growth across the life span in autism: Implications for the pathobiology of autism. *Neurobiology of Disease*, 44(1), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nbd.2011.02.012>

⁵Autistic Self Advocacy Network. (2023). *About ASAN*. <https://autisticadvocacy.org>

(continued from page 21)

research, training, and services for individuals with autism, demonstrating the increasing recognition of the importance of supporting the autism community. In addition, schools and workplaces are beginning to adopt more inclusive practices, with a growing number of institutions offering accommodations for individuals with autism. The push for inclusivity extends beyond the classroom and workplace to public spaces, as organizations and businesses recognize the need for autism-friendly environments. Many of us see that different medical professionals' offices have sensory rooms to be more inclusive for someone with ASD. Bigger churches are also providing sensory rooms. Accommodations appear in many different formats, but as a parent, it is encouraging to see this becoming more of the norm than the exception.

I have thrown a little bit of a mix between education and personal experience at you. However, that is kind of what life with an autistic loved one is like. It is constantly learning and figuring out what "works" for your person. Thankfully, by staying vigilant and focused on the care my child gets, he has managed to flourish. He gets mostly As in school, is in a regular classroom, and doesn't have an aide to follow

him around anymore. He did for his first 4 years in school. However, be careful when you ask his opinion and don't expect him to "read the room." That is lost on him, and he will be brutally honest. It's one of my favorite things about him, though. He is constantly growing and teaching me new things daily.

I have hope for his future because I have seen what he can achieve when he is determined. I have seen what some of these organizations provide for people with ASD. I have seen schools and our doctor's office provide accommodations. However, I remain vigilant as his caregiver and advocate. We have had to read the law and fight to get him what he is entitled to. Many people cringe at the word entitled but remember that's what it is. Schools don't always have a choice in what they can provide your child; they must comply with the law. And many schools don't want to because of budgetary reasons, but that's no excuse. I don't mean to go negative, but it is a reality that we must face in this community. That's just one example, but there are others. So, while the trend is going in the right direction, we have to remain aware of the challenges for people with ASD. They are normal people, just like you and me.

Father's Day Perspective *by Jewel Carrington*

My father, his father, and his father's father were all men who believed their job was to ensure their successors' survival. I love my father. He taught me lessons. He did his best to protect me. He taught me how to think freely, regardless of the perceived outcome, and be accountable for my actions. Most of all, he taught me respect.

Fatherhood to me is the greatest gift I've been granted and the best thing I've ever accomplished. However, I've learned along the way that fathers come in multiple forms. For example, my father, a proud man, never wanted help with anything. So, in turn, we fell on hard times. Some of us turned to the streets, but luckily, a basketball coach found me and pulled me into a gym. He was a Chicago city bus driver. So, he ensured I could catch the bus and meet him at the gym. Not to get better, but to be welcomed into a basketball brotherhood. He taught me how to be a teammate and lead a team, and those lessons I easily transitioned into fatherhood.

I also learned that fathers don't sleep. I am a father to four beautiful children and a bonus father to multiple other children. My biological children are 20, 18, 15, and 11. I currently have two foster boys who are ages 6 and 2. I've been a foster parent to about 10 children over the years. I enjoy every moment, even when they're being buttheads, because when they are not buttheads, they're awesome. The journey has been nothing less than rewarding, and I've probably been awake since November 2004. If I had a choice, I would never sleep.



Socks, tools, ties, wallets, and super dad BBQ aprons. Favorite food, favorite chair, favorite drink. Sons, daughters, spouses. Soccer, replays from the NBA, some NASCAR, and tennis. Laughing and relaxing. Sleeping and scratching. Chilling out on a day reserved for the bravest of men. Not the officer, not the soldier, not the firefighter. The father. He is responsible for the first lesson, the protection, the guidance, and the discipline: the leader, the teacher, the sword, and the shield.

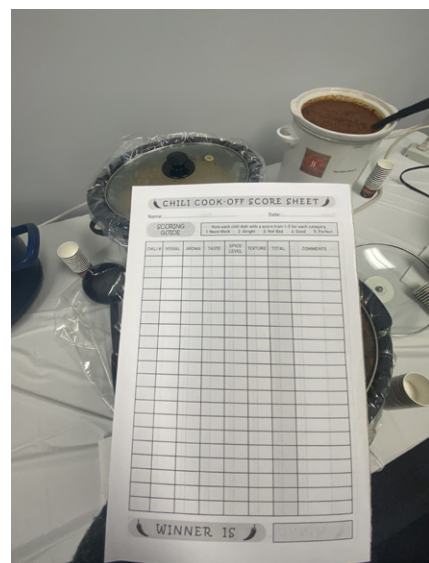
Kicking Off the Year with a Chili Cook-Off!

At the first Warden's Meeting of the year, we spiced things up with a spirited Chili Cook-Off that brought out some impressive culinary talent. With 15 incredible submissions, the competition was fierce, but three winners emerged victorious, showcasing not only their culinary skills but also the fun and teamwork that make our department special.

A special shoutout goes to Region 3 for their competitive spirit and for rocking matching aprons that stole the show. Their

enthusiasm was almost as impressive as the chili recipes they prepared!

Thank you to everyone who participated, whether by submitting a chili or dessert recipe, or serving as a judge. It was a fantastic way to kick off the year with camaraderie, fun, and a little friendly competition. Here's to more events that bring our community together!



State of Illinois
Illinois Department of Corrections



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Story ideas, feedback and comments can be submitted to
Staff Wellness Response Team at
DOC.staffwellnessresponseteam@illinois.gov

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