

ILLINOIS PRISON PROJECT

Annual Report
2020-2021





Overview

In the past year, the Illinois Prison Project:

- Freed **43 people**, sparing our clients **200 years** in prison and saving taxpayers **\$20.5 million**.
- Filed **103 cases** for our incarcerated clients.
- Organized and hosted **58 events**.
- Mailed **1,365 toolkits** with information about navigating the clemency process to incarcerated people, their families and lawyers.
- Provided free legal consultation to **322 people** through our twice monthly legal clinics.



DIRECT REPRESENTATION



Corey Knox

Compassion Not Cages

Serious Mental Illness

IPP represents about 65 people who have been designated as seriously mentally ill by the Illinois Department of Corrections. Our clients have spent years – or even decades – in solitary confinement, an inhumane and unjust practice with devastating impacts on a person's mental health.

During prolonged isolation, each of our clients engaged in low-level conduct, such as spitting or throwing water. Each was then prosecuted with a serious felony charge that carries a sentence rang-



From left: Brothers Corey and Christopher Knox

ing from three to 14 years. Many were prosecuted repeatedly, further criminalizing mental illness.

This year, we brought home brothers Corey and Christopher Knox. Corey, who has schizoaffective disorder and a history of self harm, spent about 22 years in solitary confinement. Prosecutors added nearly two decades to his sentence for charges that stem from his time in isolation.

Christopher spent about 17 years in solitary confinement, despite having recurrent depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. He was sentenced to an additional 13 years for spitting or throwing liquid soap on a guard.

In both cases, our appeals to IDOC led to the restoration of sentencing credits known as good time.

Three Strikes

Illinois' punitive three strikes law affords prosecutors the discretion to seek mandatory life sentences for people convicted of their third Class X felony. We represent more than 100 clients serving natural life sentences for gas station robberies in which no one was hurt, for possessing drugs in their own apartments and for muggings at knifepoint. To date, we've secured the freedom of 15 people.

Among them is Dwayne Dykes, who was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for a

1993 armed robbery in which no one was harmed and no weapon was he was also at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19 as the virus ravaged the nation's prisons.

July Last July, we welcomed Dwayne home to his family after Gov. J.B. Pritzker commuted the remainder of his sentence. And exactly one year after his release, we celebrated Dwayne's marriage to his partner, Tracey.



Dwayne Dykes and his partner, Tracey, at their wedding ceremony.



Tewkunzi Green

Women & Survivors Project

This March, IPP launched the Woman & Survivors Project, a unique effort to push back against the criminalization of women and survivors of gender-based violence, led by Rachel White-Domain. Of the roughly 1,700 women in Illinois prisons, three-quarters are survivors of domestic abuse and nearly all have experienced some type of gender-based violence.

Fearing for her life and the life of her infant child, Tewkunzi Green killed her abusive boyfriend after an argument escalated to physical violence. Though she was acting in self defense, Tewkunzi was charged with first-degree murder and sentenced to 34 years in prison. She served more than 17 years before we won her release in November. Tewkunzi now serves as IPP's Community Educator.



SYSTEMIC ADVOCACY



Joe Coleman

Medical Release Act

In 2019, Joe Coleman — a father to six children, a decorated Vietnam veteran and a former IPP client — died in an Illinois prison after succumbing to a battle with terminal cancer. He died alone, stripped of his dignity, while serving a life sentence for stealing \$640 from a gas station.

The criminal legal system routinely fails incarcerated people with illnesses and disabilities. In Joe's

honor, and for the many people similarly situated across the state, our team wrote the Joe Coleman Medical Release Act with national and local stakeholders. The measure, which allows incarcerated people with terminal illness or disabilities to end their sentences and return to their families, passed both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly this session with bipartisan support. The law goes into effect on January 1, 2022.

COVID-19 Lawsuit

In partnership with civil rights organizations across Chicago, IPP filed two federal lawsuits and a state mandamus against IDOC and the state of Illinois seeking the immediate release of thousands of incarcerated people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We devoted hundreds of hours to litigation and settlement negotiations, ultimately securing a settlement that resulted in the release of about 1,000 people and the adoption of policies that would further reduce incarceration.





Anthony Gay spent more than two decades in solitary confinement. He was freed last year, after IPP won the restoration of his good time. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Good Time Restoration

Through our legal representation, IPP represents dozens of seriously mentally clients who have lost years – even decades – of sentencing credit for low level conduct they committed while in solitary confinement. IDOC's outdated policy allowed prison staff to revoke an unlimited amount of good time, but left in place significant barriers to restore time that had been taken away. More importantly, the Department lacked a policy for the regular review and restoration of good time.

Our conversations with agency leadership directly led to the implementation of a policy that automatically restores good time for people who have not received a ticket in the last one to two years, depending on a person's underlying conviction. The policy change meant the immediate restoration of good time for thousands of people – in some cases, our clients received back up to two decades that had been revoked.



EDUCATION



IPP ambassadors learn about the history of mass incarceration from Dr. Christina Rivers. Our ambassador program trains formerly incarcerated people in advocacy and outreach.

Women & Survivors Project Launch

At the launch of our Women & Survivors Project, IPP hosted a conversation with Tewkunzi Green and Vickie Quinn, two formerly incarcerated women who survived abuse. The conversation was moderated by Deana Lewis, a scholar and activist, and featured remarks by activist and grassroots organizer Mariame Kaba. The recording has been viewed more than 1,300 times.

Sister Helen Prejean Event

Renaldo Hudson, IPP's Director of Education, joined renowned author and anti-capital punishment advocate Sister Helen Prejean in January for a conversation around justice reform, the abolition of the death penalty, redemption and feelings of hope.

About IPP

IPP continued ambitious growth over the past year. Our staff quadrupled in size, including the addition of a Director of Advocacy and a Director of Education. This year, we also completed a back-end merger with Restore Justice Foundation, a mission-aligned organization that was formerly IPP's fiscal sponsor. This merger has allowed us to provide better benefits to our employees, conserve valuable resources, and work more closely with an important ally.

