





FY 2023

Annual REPORT

Illinois Prison Project

53 W Jackson Blvd, Suite 452
Chicago, IL 60604

 1 (312) 324-4463

 illinoisprisonproject.org



OVERVIEW

107 people free and counting!

Throughout the last fiscal year, the Illinois Prison Project:

- Freed 19 people from prison, sparing our clients 1,510 years behind bars and saving taxpayers \$132 million.
- Filed 54 clemency petitions, 34 medical release petitions, provided 25 people with administrative advocacy support, and represented 2 people at their resentencing hearings.
- Mailed 882 legal resources with information about the clemency process, medical release, sentence credits and more to incarcerated people, their families and lawyers.
- IPP's education team hosted and/or collaborated with partner organizations on 62 events for the public and various stakeholders, reaching 13,903 people.
- Under the leadership and training provided by IPP's Education department, IPP graduated its first two cohorts of Ambassadors and welcomed its 3rd and 4th cohorts.
- Our two FY23 Ambassador cohorts hosted 15 events reaching 2415 people, and attended 37 trainings totaling 74 hours on curriculum covering personal storytelling to legislative advocacy to communication styles.
- Provided free legal consultation and advice to 103 people through our twice-monthly legal clinics.
- Assisted 22 people with reentry support.



DIRECT REPRESENTATION



The Joe Coleman Medical Release Act, a bill written and championed by IPP, became law on Jan. 1, 2022. For the first time in Illinois' history, incarcerated people with terminal illnesses or serious disabilities now have an expedited pathway to release. If granted by the Illinois Prisoner Review Board, people in prison can end their sentences, return home to their loved ones, and receive quality medical care not otherwise provided by the Illinois Department of Corrections.

In just 18 months, our team filed 60 medical release applications on behalf of incarcerated clients, ultimately securing freedom for 28 people. Among them is David Fayson, a 61 year old man who became medically incapacitated as a result of a meningioma—a primary central nervous system brain tumor—that was misdiagnosed by the prison for two years before it was eventually identified and removed in 2003.

MEDICAL RELEASE



David Fayson (right) and his sister

Mr. Fayson began experiencing symptoms of his tumor in February 2001. Despite one doctor noting symptoms indicative of a brain tumor in July 2002, Mr. Fayson received only ibuprofen and vitamins during the more than eight visits with Stateville doctors over the next year. An eventual MRI revealed Mr. Fayson's tumor—then three to four inches in diameter—in February of 2003. The medical neglect David experienced while under the care of the Illinois Department of Corrections compounded with the severity of his eventual diagnosis resulted in brain atrophy. The severe deterioration in Mr. Fayson's mental and physical health prevented him from performing multiple daily living activities, including walking, brushing his teeth, and bathing himself.

In 2022, IPP filed a petition for Mr. Fayson's immediate release. The Prisoner Review Board granted that petition, and Mr. Fayson was reunited with his family. After IPP won Mr. Fayson's medical release, his family welcomed him home with open arms. He now lives with his sister who is a care professional, with a background as a medical assistant, a certified nurse assistant, and a phlebotomist.

IPP is grateful Mr. Fayson is now receiving the critical medical care and attention he was deprived of while incarcerated.

WOMEN & SURVIVORS PROJECT

In the summer of 2022, the Women & Survivors Project (WSP) launched a new, innovative clemency cohort to free criminalized survivors of abuse and gender-based violence, each of whom has spent at least 20 years in prison. Since then, IPP has filed 6 petitions through our cohort program which recruited more than 24 pro bono attorneys from law firms including Latham & Watkins LLP, Cooley LLP and DLA Piper this fiscal year.

WSP project held 5 continuing legal education courses for pro bono attorneys, spanning topics from trauma-informed interviewing, to documenting abuse, to storytelling through lawyering.

PRO BONO SPOTLIGHT: MELINDA KLEEHAMER

Several years ago I began writing clemency petitions for deserving individuals under the supervision of the Illinois Prison Project. IPP provided hours of creditable continuing legal education, extensive written examples and comprehensive in-person support so that we, as a team, could work to reduce our prison population and bring justice to the abused and forgotten. Because clemency is a matter of executive grace and not a legal right, I didn't worry that my lack of criminal law background meant I might overlook critical deadlines and permanently damage a client's right to relief.

My IPP colleagues are brilliant and inspirational and with their help I've produced some of the most meaningful work in my long legal career. To date, all of my clients' clemencies are pending and no one has been denied. Because of IPP's impressive track record, I am hopeful that I'm doing my part to restore freedom to people who don't deserve to be behind bars. The world's problems may be too big to solve, but each of us can change the world by saving one person at a time.

In addition to its work supporting pro bono partners, the Women & Survivor's Project staff provide direct representation to incarcerated survivors of gender-based violence in clemency petitions, parole hearings, and sentencings.

WOMEN & SURVIVORS PROJECT

CLIENT SPOTLIGHT: JANET JACKSON

IPP client Janet Jackson has been in prison since 1986, and is a survivor of domestic violence. Thanks to the vital work of IPP's Women and Survivors Project, Dr. Jackson received a commutation in May of 2023, transforming her life without parole sentence into one that makes her eligible for parole in early 2024.



Dr. Jackson, who earned two PhDs while in prison, is incarcerated for killing her abusive husband. Although she survived years of sexual assault at the hands of her husband, that abuse was not presented at trial, in part because marital rape was not a crime in Illinois until 1994.

Fueled by her own experiences, Dr. Jackson has been a dedicated advocate for other incarcerated survivors during the 37 years she's been in prison. Upon learning that her commutation petition had been granted, Dr. Jackson immediately identified another incarcerated survivor of gender-based violence who needed the WSP's help.

Illinois Prison Project will represent Dr. Jackson at her parole hearings early next year and is hopeful that she'll be granted parole and allowed to go home.

THE HOPE PROJECT



Thanks to generous funding through the R3 (Restore. Reinvest. Renew.) grant program administered by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, Illinois Prison Project launched an expansion of its legal services for incarcerated people serving lengthy sentences from the South and West sides of Chicago. To implement a special program, which seeks to connect incarcerated people to reentry services while they are still incarcerated, IPP has partnered with Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR). Through this Project, IPP and PBMR work collaboratively to provide clients robust legal services, case management, and reentry services for incarcerated people who have served long prison sentences and hope to return to the Southside of Chicago.

Throughout FY23, IPP opened 75 new cases for legal representation and filed 28 commutation and/or administrative advocacy efforts for its clients. Although only a year old, this program has already resulted in the release of five clients. Each client not only receives holistic legal representation from the Illinois Prison Project, but also receives holistic case management support from PBMR before their petitions for release are granted, ensuring that both they and their family members are well-supported and well-prepared to return to their communities.

THE HOPE PROJECT

ALTAI THORTON: COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT TESTIMONIAL

Altai Thorton is one amongst many clients to benefit from the holistic support provided by IPP and PBMR's R3 campaign. Tiffany Johnson, a PBMR case worker during FY23, and Nadia Woods, IPP attorney, worked in collaboration support and represented Mr. Altai Thornton throughout the clemency process.

Tiffany and Nadia both spent months speaking to Altai, often contacting him multiple times per week, in an effort to foster a deep and trusting relationship. While Nadia was primarily focused on gaining the context needed to zealously represent Altai in legal proceedings, Tiffany prioritized figuring out how to best support him throughout the remainder of his incarceration and with re-entry support upon his release. Tiffany and Altai developed a concrete re-entry plan, which Nadia featured in his clemency petition. Notably, Tiffany was able to coordinate a reunion between Altai and his father--best friends who had not been able to see each other for more than two decades due to physical and financial restraints.

Together, Nadia and Tiffany advocated for Altai during his clemency hearing. Because of her deep connection with Altai, Tiffany was an instrumental witness; she was able to provide concrete and tangible examples of Altai's maintenance of his mental health, his coping strategies and his vision for his future. Today, Nadia and Tiffany both keep in close contact with Altai while his clemency is pending with the Governor's office. IPP hopes that Altai and his father will be reunited for good soon!

SAUL COLBERT: CLIENT SUCCESS STORY



In July, IPP's Education Team drove to Western Correctional Center to greet Saul Colbert, who was freed after serving 36 years in prison for robbing a person of their groceries. A long-time IPP client, Saul worked with an IPP pro bono attorney to complete a clemency petition, but after two years awaiting the Governor's decision, his health was deteriorating. Saul was diagnosed with dementia when he was 80 years old and living full time in the prison's infirmary. IPP worked quickly with him, his family and friends to file a medical release petition. The Prisoner Review Board granted Saul's medical release and he now lives close to his family in a nursing home in Chicago.

Mr. Colbert grew up in both Mississippi and Illinois where he was forced to navigate a life marked by pervasive racism and violence with his close friends Wheeler Parker (who later became a reverend and civil rights leader), and Reverend Parker's cousin, Emmett Till.

Emmett, originally from Chicago, was infamously abducted, tortured, and lynched by a white mob near Webbs, Mississippi in 1955 while visiting family after being accused of offending a white woman. Reverend Parker, who at 84 years old wrote a letter of support for Saul's medical release, is the last surviving witness to Emmett's kidnapping.

Since being released in July 2023, Saul receives visits from his family often, met his grandchildren for the first time, and attended a barbeque with extended family he's been separated from for decades. Saul spent much of his time in prison memorizing famous speeches and monologues. Despite his age and his dementia, he continues to share his love of Shakespeare and the oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr. by presenting his memorized speeches at various gatherings. We were thrilled to visit him and to know he is loved and cared for, surrounded by his family after many years.

R3 funding not only helped to provide Saul the legal representation that led to his freedom, but also allowed him to return to the area where his roots and familial support remain deep.



FELONY MURDER

In FY23, Illinois Prison Project launched a new campaign focused on providing legal assistance to emerging adults convicted under the felony-murder rule. Under Illinois' felony-murder law, anyone involved in a "forcible felony" can be charged with first-degree murder if another person is killed during the underlying felony. The law allows prosecutors to charge people, such as getaway drivers and lookouts, with first-degree murder. Felony-murder applies even when someone did not kill another person themselves, and sometimes, even when they were physically not at the scene.

Anyone who plays any role in the underlying crime is legally responsible for first-degree murder, even if they did not know that anyone would be hurt. Fundamentally, Illinois' felony-murder rule allows people to be prosecuted for acts—specifically murder—that are committed by other people.

CORREAIL NASH: CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

The injustices of the felony-murder rule are particularly evident in cases like IPP client Correail Nash's. When Correail was only 18 years old, he was convicted of the first-degree murder of his best friend after an off-duty police officer shot at the boys while they were running away from an attempted carjacking. Correail was sentenced to 32 years in prison, and he has served over 17 years. Correail's petition for clemency is currently pending.

EMERGING ADULTS

Emerging adults—defined as people between the ages of 18-25—comprise 60% of those prosecuted under Illinois' felony-murder law

Advances in neurobiology have revealed that this vulnerable group are, developmentally, more like teenagers than adults, and are thus susceptible to peer pressure and more likely to act impulsively. Given that felony-murder cases are typically crimes of impulse rather than premeditation, this neurological immaturity makes emerging adults particularly likely to be harmed by Illinois' overbroad felony-murder rule. IPP is working to free over-incarcerated emerging adults who have been harmed by this unfair law.

Included in this innovative campaign are ten clients who could not be prosecuted for felony-murder today, thanks to common sense reforms enacted by the 2021 SAFE-T Act. This reform prevents a horrific but common practice: prosecuting a person for first-degree murder when a death is caused by a "third party," such as when police shoot and kill a person's co-participant in a crime. Although groundbreaking, this law is not retroactive, leaving many people incarcerated for violent deaths that were perpetrated by the police and other non-participants. Of the IPP clients who remain in prison for murders truly committed by police officers and others, four are serving natural life sentences, and another five are serving sentences of 25 years or more.

Since the launch of the Felony Murder campaign, and led by Equal Justice Work Fellow Sarah Free, IPP has filed four clemencies and has already won one commutation for a client who has served 21 years of a life sentence. Now, that client will have an opportunity to be paroled by the Prisoner Review Board.

FELONY MURDER

In addition to direct legal representation, Sarah offered five continuing legal education training sessions to attorneys across Illinois, two of which were facilitated in partnership with The Gault Center, a national leader in youth and emerging adult defense. Training topics included adolescent development, emerging adult development, and the felony-murder rule in Illinois.

Illinois Prison Project Action Fund, IPP's sister 501(c)(4), introduced a felony-murder reform bill in the Illinois House of Representatives in January of 2023. If it passes, HB3378 will reclassify felony-murder from first-degree murder to second-degree murder. This common sense reform will dramatically reduce the prison sentences associated with felony-murder.



EDUCATION



COMMUNITY EDUCATION

IPP is actively shifting the narrative around incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, especially those serving long sentences. IPP's Education Team teaches communities about the harm caused by excessive sentences, especially to communities of color, and the need for back end reform.



This educational, community-based programming literally meets people “where they are,” with first-hand accounts, calls to action, and reading lists all tailored specifically for these audiences. Compelling first-person narratives are supplemented with data, discussion guides, and an open-door policy to bring IPP’s message to more people. By centering the voices and expertise of formerly incarcerated people, IPP is shifting the public’s perception on excessive sentencing in Illinois.

IPP’s Education Team is led by Director of Education Renaldo Hudson, who survived 37 years of a life without parole sentence after originally being sentenced to the death penalty, and who was released only after IPP represented him for clemency. His sentence was commuted in 2020. Similarly, Education Team members Vincent Boggan and Anthony Jones are also both former clients who were each sentenced to virtual or natural life sentences and were freed after working with IPP on successful commutation and parole requests. IPP’s Education Team not only has direct experience with the egregious harms of the criminal legal and prison systems, but also the incredible strengths of so many people trapped within those systems, and steps society must take to create pathways to bring people home.

LUNCH & LEARN

In FY23, IPP hosted seven “Lunch and Learn” events, which are virtual panels covering topics such as the Dangerous One Sided Narrative, SAFE-T Act Misconceptions, Community Healing, and Women & Incarceration. IPP also hosted 53 public events at colleges, universities, law schools, high schools, churches, libraries, and workplaces. Through those events, IPP educated 12,137 people about the harms of mass incarceration and the prison system.

LEGAL RESOURCES

IPP’s Education Team creates and shares legal resources designed to help incarcerated people advocate for themselves, including toolkits on commutation, sentencing credit, medical release, and more. IPP distributes these resources throughout the Department of Corrections, and makes them freely available to community members on its website. In FY23, IPP shared legal resources with 882 incarcerated people.

COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS IN PRISON



IPP's Community Navigator program, launched in 2022, is an innovative peer education effort designed to dramatically increase access to legal information for people incarcerated in Illinois. A small group of incarcerated participants from each prison facility join IPP for a series of Know-Your-Rights trainings led by IPP's Education Team, where they learn about commutation, pardon, medical release, and sentencing credit. Incarcerated participants gain skills necessary to help their peers navigate a variety of legal and institutional barriers. These navigators share IPP legal resources with their incarcerated communities. If they discover a person who needs legal information, the navigator contacts IPP staff so the resources can be dispensed immediately. Incarcerated participants are paid a stipend for their participation in the program.

During FY23, our 68 Community Navigators from 14 IDOC facilities held 9 trainings for 1,544 incarcerated people within Illinois prisons. IPP staff distributed resources on several topics IDOC facilities held 9 trainings for 1,544 incarcerated people within Illinois prisons. IPP staff distributed resources on several t IDOC facilities held nine trainings for 1,544 incarcerated people within Illinois prisons. IPP staff distributed resources on several topics IDOC facilities held 9 trainings for 1,544 incarcerated people within Illinois prisons. IPP staff distributed resources on several topics::opics::

- The clemency application process.
- The medical release application process.
- The Illinois Department of Corrections' grievance process.
- The protocol to request a transfer to another prison.
- Sentencing Credit Updates
- The First 14 Days of Freedom: A Re-entry Guide

AMBASSADORS

During its eight-month Ambassador Program, IPP provides formerly incarcerated leaders who want to galvanize state-level systems change with training, experience, and financial support.



The Ambassador Program is one of the ways that IPP operationalizes a core principle of IPP's work: to act in solidarity with and take leadership from formerly incarcerated people of color. Previous Ambassadors had, on average, served 15.3 years in prison before being released. Ninety-six percent were people of color, and forty-two percent were women. While hugely impactful in their own right prior to beginning the training, IPP's Ambassadors have no formal training in public speaking or advocacy work. The Ambassador Program seeks to support their leadership by providing them with the skills, training, and support they will need to become the next leaders for criminal legal reform.

The Ambassador Program begins with a series of intense training sessions for each formerly incarcerated leader, supplemented by individual coaching sessions. During FY23, Ambassador Cohorts #2 and #3 each participated in the rigorous 23-session training program, which covered topics including Restorative Justice, the Criminal Legal System: Nuts and Bolts, Storytelling, Targeting Decision Makers, Gender Identity and Sexuality, Talking to Journalists, Social Media, Executive Skills, Dealing with Trauma and Self Care, and more. In FY23 alone, IPP conducted 120 discrete training sessions in total, training 24 formerly incarcerated leaders.

In addition to skill-building, IPP's Ambassador Fellowship Program trains system-impacted people in advocacy and outreach. Throughout the program and after it, Ambassadors gain experience in public speaking and media through participation on panels, interviews with journalists, and engagement with community members, all arranged by IPP. FY23 Ambassadors hosted 15 events reaching 2,415 people, in addition to participating in podcasts, university research symposiums, interviews with journalists, and other forms of community education.

Our robust training program has supported Ambassadors in becoming compelling advocates, who have become leaders who effectively educate community members and policymakers about the profound need for back-end reform through sharing their own stories. Ambassadors have taken the skills they have gained through the program to amplify their effectiveness at criminal legal reform organizations across the state, including Women's Justice Institute, Restore Justice Foundation, North Lawndale Employment Network, Cabrini Green Legal Aid, Precious Blood Ministries of Reconciliation, READI Chicago, and Contextos.

MEDIA

IPP works to educate journalists about long-term incarceration, and to change their perceptions about people serving excessive sentences in Illinois. In addition to arranging interviews with released clients, family members of currently incarcerated people, and other system players, IPP regularly provides journalists with our original research about Illinois' prison system, to help them educate the public about the desperate need for back-end reform.

**CHICAGO
SUN-TIMES**

Illinois has a law to release seriously ill and disabled prisoners. It's time to use it.

THE APPEAL

LIFE IN PRISON FOR A KILLING HE DIDN'T CAUSE OR CONDONE

In Illinois alone, around 500 people are currently serving first-degree felony murder sentences for killings they did not commit themselves or intend to commit. Reform efforts must consider past injustices as well as future abuses.



During FY23, IPP's earned media included 416 mentions in outlets including: Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, NBC Chicago, CBS Chicago, Pantagraph, WBEZ, Truthout, and WTTW. These important pieces discussed such topics as: surviving criminalized domestic violence, the need for robust use of clemency, the importance of second chances, and surviving a death sentence--reaching 1.24 billion people across all mentions.

ABOUT IPP

IPP continued dramatic expansion over the past year. In FY23, IPP grew to a team of 24 staff members, adding crucial members to its lawyering and education team.



It also launched the Illinois Prison Project Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) organization dedicated to lobbying for criminal legal reform legislation in Springfield.

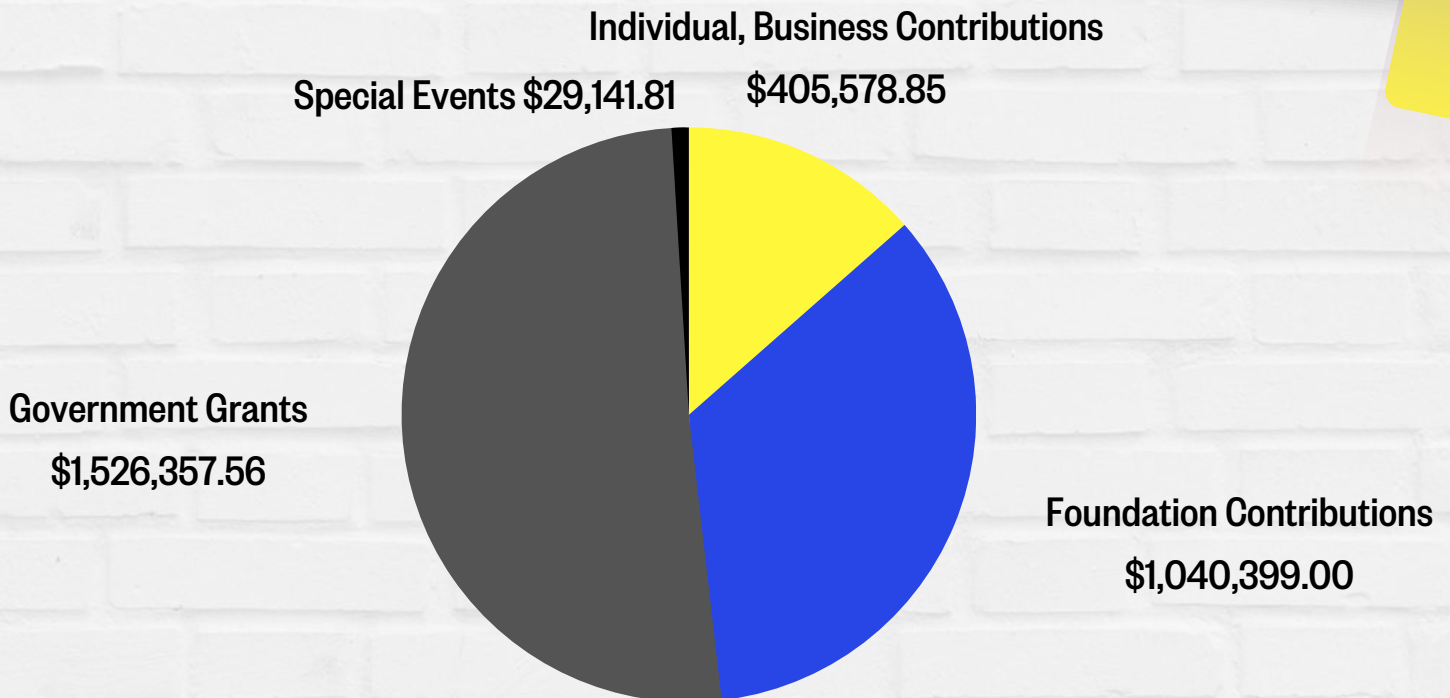


**ILLINOIS
PRISON
PROJECT
ACTION FUND**

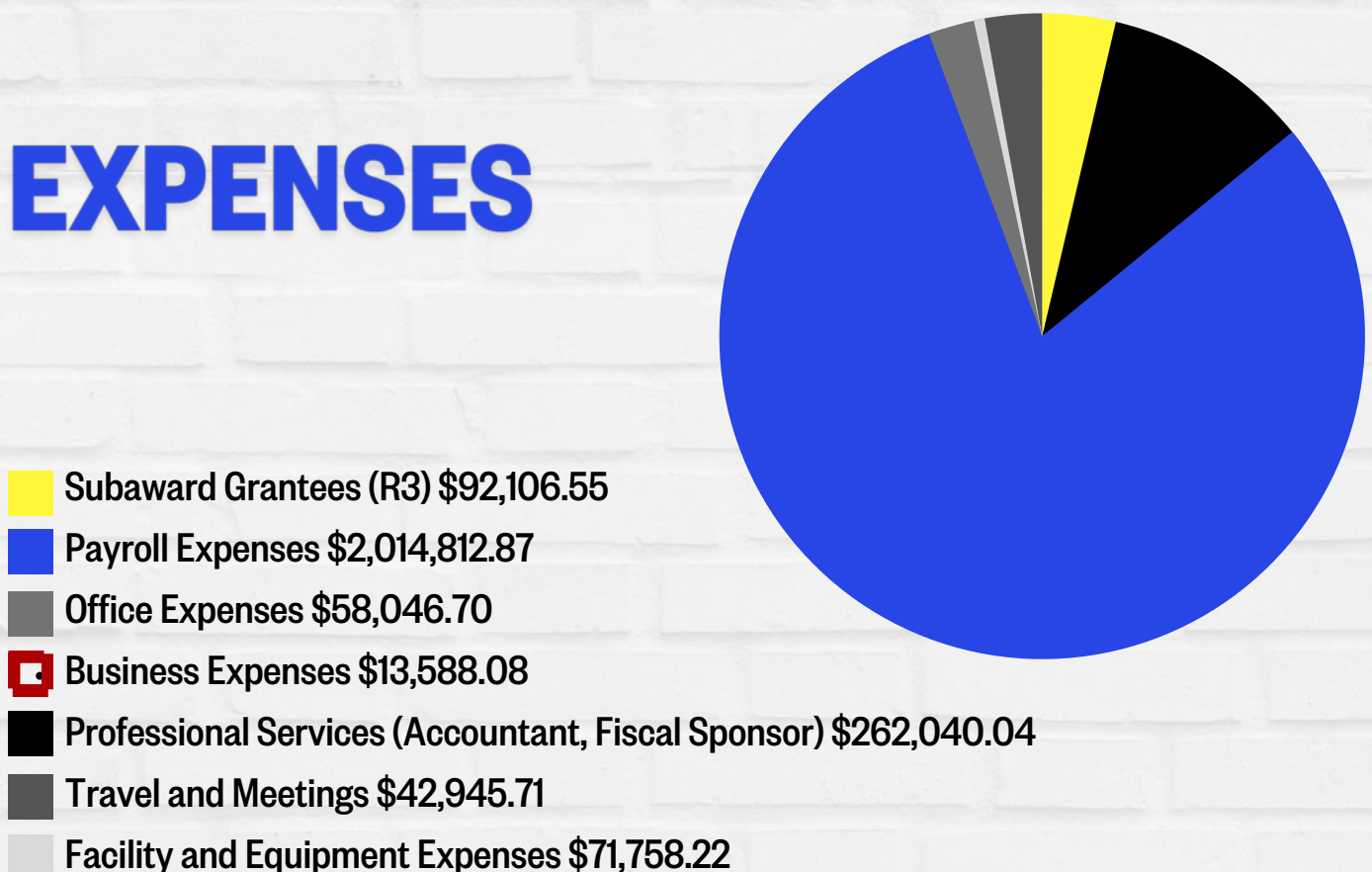


FINANCIAL SUMMARY

INCOME



EXPENSES



ILLINOIS PRISON PROJECT

