COLLEGE INSIDE in collaboration with PRISONCAST! July - Nov. 2024

What does the Stateville shutdown mean for higher education behind bars?

Students applaud at the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project and Northeastern Illinois University's University Without Walls 2022 graduation at Stateville near Joliet, Ill. Photo: Sarah-Ji/WBEZ

By Charlotte West

Jerrell Matthews has known for months that he'd be transferring from Stateville Correctional Center, a men's maximum-security prison outside of Joliet where he's lived for the last six years.

But he didn't think he'd be relocating so far away.

Matthews expected that it would be with the rest of the men graduating from Northeastern Illinois University's prison education program this fall. Instead, he's moving to Shawnee Correctional Center, a medium-security prison almost 330 miles away near the Kentucky border, Tiffani Blandon, a close friend of Matthews, told Open Campus.

Transfers from Stateville to other facilities around Illinois began at the end of August. Matthews was one of dozens of men who are being moved from the prison this week, according to family members and men incarcerated there.

A federal ruling that came down in early August ordering Illinois prison officials to empty the decrepit facility by Sept. 30 resulted in abrupt transfers from Stateville, despite what educators have said were assurances from the Illinois Department of Corrections that students and alumni from the same education programs would be allowed to move together.

In March, Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced the state's plan to close and rebuild Stateville, along with Logan Correctional Center, a women's prison, due to conditions such as polluted water, vermin infestations and crumbling buildings.

The hundred-year-old Stateville is like many other aging prisons across the country, such as Sing Sing in New York State and San Quentin in California: despite their poor physical infrastructure, they have become sought after destinations for higher education. Jennifer Lackey, founding director of the Northwestern Prison Education Program, told Open Campus that some students had even chosen to transfer to Stateville from lower-security facilities in order to take advantage of the educational opportunities there.

Stateville has had five colleges, including Northwestern, operating there, while many other facilities in Illinois have no higher education at all. More than a quarter of the 400 some men who were still at Stateville at the beginning of this week were enrolled in higher education, according to the Illinois Department of Corrections.

A thriving intellectual community

At the end of August, Open Campus, along with our local partner WBEZ, published a story on what the impending closure means for the thriving intellectual community that has been built at Stateville over the last several years, with many incarcerated college graduates there continuing to remain engaged with their academic institutions as teaching assistants and fellows.

The closure of a prison can sometimes mean that students are scattered all over the state in the middle of their education. In a 2021 story that Open Campus published about the closure of the Washington State Reformatory outside Seattle, we found that only half of the students who had been enrolled in the college program there had been able to continue their education more than a year after they were transferred. The closure also meant that University Beyond Bars, the nonprofit operating the college program at

the reformatory, had nowhere else to go. The organization has subsequently rebranded and pivoted to reentry work.

Given the fact that they knew the Stateville closure was imminent, educators had hoped that they would be able to work with the Illinois corrections department to ensure a smoother transition, finding new homes for their programs and students. Representatives of the various college programs at Stateville told Open Campus that they had submitted lists of current students and alumni to the department in hopes that they will be able to transfer with them to new facilities.

But a representative of at least one program says that is not happening. About 30 students and alumni – including Matthews – were on the list to be moved to Hill Correctional Center, about three hours from Chicago, in order to stay with the Prison+Neighborhood Arts/Education Project. Executive Director Arianna Salgado said Matthews and seven others were among those shipped to other facilities across the state at the end of August. Matthews and his peers were just weeks away from completing his bachelor's degree and will likely miss any kind of graduation celebration.

Salgado said that the move to Hill Correctional Center, which is around three hours from Chicago, already made it difficult to offer the same kind of programming they have had at Stateville. Program administrators in multiple programs have also been looking at how they might utilize technology for both classroom instruction and other activities. Christina Rivers, a professor at DePaul University which brings campus-based students to the prisons to study with incarcerated students, said to move to any facilities more than two hours from Chicago effectively "kills off" their programming.

The trauma of transfers

In addition to being separated from his fellow students, it will also be difficult for Matthews to see his family, said Blandon. His daughter lives in Los Angeles and has to fly to Chicago to see him. Now the family has to drive an additional five hours in hopes of visiting.

"If you get there and it's locked down, they're turning us back around, no matter if we're from out of town or not," Blandon said.

While many welcome the closure of Stateville, the abrupt timing of the transfers has also caused heightened confusion and anxiety among some in the incarcerated population at Stateville – especially now that they aren't sure if they'll be able to stay with their programs. Darrell Fair, who earned a bachelor's from Northeastern Illinois University and a master's from North Park Theological Seminary, said he would have ideally liked to stay at Stateville during the rebuild.

"You're told to pack all belongings one day and only find out your new destination the day of transfer," he wrote in an email. "The trauma associated with these transfers [has] affected me far worse than any adverse living conditions experienced at Stateville."

Jamie Ames said her son's father, Daniel Perkins, who was also on the Prison+Neighborhood Arts/Education Project's list to move to Hill as a teaching assistant, is also unexpectedly going to Shawnee. He has been receiving ongoing medical treatment from University of Illinois Chicago Hospital.

"The most frustrating part of all of it is that they stress transparency, but there's so much lack of communication," Ames said.

Corrections department spokesperson Naomi Puzzello previously said the department considers many factors while determining placement for transfers, including "programming, medical and mental health needs, staffing ratios at the receiving facility, and security of individuals in custody and staff."

The remaining men at Stateville prepared to move as more transfers were expected throughout September.

"These past few days, I've seen piles and piles of discarded family artifacts and treasured memories, some built up over decades," Fair said. "In order to be in compliance, all personal property must fit within two small boxes. Decades of memories reduced to the confines of tiny plastic boxes."

Charlotte West is a national reporter covering education in prisons for Open Campus, a nonprofit newsroom focused on higher education. A version of this story was published in September 2024.

Lawsuit claims misapplication of law is leaving people stuck in Illinois prisons

An Illinois judge cleared the way in mid-November for a broader legal challenge to how state prison officials have been calculating sentence reductions, potentially affecting hundreds of incarcerated people who say they should have been released from prison already because they participated in rehabilitative programs.

The ruling gives the go ahead to a statewide lawsuit against Illinois Department of Corrections Acting Director Latoya Hughes, expanding what started as one prisoner's complaint filed without the help of an attorney. The lawsuit challenges the way the prison system has implemented a change in law meant to give people more time off their sentences for participating in work and education programs. That change went into effect in January.

Almost a year later, some incarcerated individuals say they still haven't received proper credit for participating in eligible programs. Some of them have been participating in these activities

In May, prisoner Eric Wright, who has been incarcerated since 1994, filed a case against the Illinois corrections department. Last month, Kirkland & Ellis LLP and Uptown People's Law Center joined his case in an effort to use it as the vehicle for the broader class action.

Memories from Stateville

WBEZ and Open Campus asked men currently and formerly incarcerated at Stateville for their thoughts on the closure. Below are excerpts from their emails or from interviews, which have been edited for clarity and brevity. *This story was originally co-published with WBEZ on September 17, 2024. Lauren Frost is the lead producer of WBEZ's Prisoncast!, a special audio project for people inside Illinois prisons.*

James Lenoir, 39

A student of the Northwestern Prison Education Program, Lenoir was released from prison more than a year ago. Photo: Manuel Martinez/WBEZ.

Once I got on the bus and found out I was going to Stateville, I was happy, because I knew I had potential to educate myself and also work better on my case than I could in Menard prison. So, yeah, certain things worked out good, but under the conditions I had to live through… I'm forever traumatized. Like I need to drink bottled water. I like filtered water, I have to see it. It's things that you shouldn't have to go through, that you go through, that I wouldn't want nobody else to go through. I risked me dying in Stateville to get out of prison.

Alann Vega, 40

Vega is currently enrolled in the master's program offered at Stateville through the School of Restorative Arts at North Park Theological Seminary. Photo: Karl Soderstrom.

I have been in prison for nearly twenty-five years. I have practically grown up here. Within those twenty-five years I have developed some great relationships with people who have been a father figure to me, brothers, uncles, friends, in essence – a family. I won't miss the structure of this place but I know I will miss the great people I've had the opportunity to grow up with. Great people who challenged my old way of thinking, helped me grow and taught me a different way of life and kept me safe. My fellow incarcerated people, my teachers, volunteers and yes even the correctional staff that treated me humanely, with dignity and respect. Even the ones who didn't, I thank you because you taught me self-restraint and how to forgive. I wish the closure process could be done differently instead of rushing it because when things are rushed mistakes can happen. Perhaps, this is an opportunity for Governor [JB] Pritzker to make a historical change to end mass incarceration and do the right thing in bringing back parole and granting clemency to those men and women who have truly changed their lives.

Stanley Howard, 61

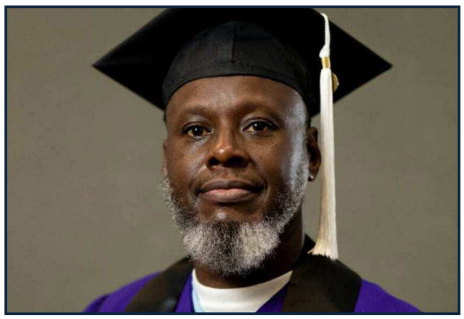
Howard said he was tortured by Chicago Police into confessing to a murder he didn't commit. He spent 39 years in prison and was later pardoned for that crime. Photo: Manuel Martinez/WBEZ.

I was participating in this program with the University of Chicago, and the topic changed…to the closing of Stateville. And this one young lady said, "Well, if they're closing Stateville down to build a new state-of-the-art prison, wouldn't you want them to be inside of a state-of-the-art prison instead of this rundown facility that they have?" And my answer to that was, "There's no such thing as a state-of-the-art dog house. Because a dog house is still a dog house." Why not spend that money going forward instead of backwards? … Give a person a chance of not being able to go to prison in the first place, instead of always being punitive on the back end.

Jamal Bakr, 40

Bakr is a graduate of the master's program offered at Stateville through the School of Restorative Arts at North Park Theological Seminary. Photo: Karl Soderstrom.

I am concerned that the dispersing of academic programs to various facilities — that may also be in states of disrepair — can make these prisons appear viable and therefore less prone to future closure for the sake of access to academic programming. Who is to say that displacing these programs won't jeopardize their ability to commit long-term? ... Yet, I am optimistic that this dispersion — of truly transformed and educated people — will cause waves of positive cultural changes across the receiving facilities, further evidencing the need for robust programming access.



William Peeples, 60

Peeples was part of the first class to earn a degree at Northwestern University's bachelor's program at Stateville. Photo: Northwestern University.

We are not a monolith, so I can't speak for all or even most incarcerated humans who are currently enrolled in educational programs. However, I will say this: many of us just don't want to die from poisoned water, or from inhaling mold spores, or from cancer due to the unhealthy environment we are forced to live in while trying to improve ourselves and gain an education from an elite college or university.

Formerly incarcerated Illinoisans vote for the first time

Marvin Treadwell, left and below, votes for the first time on Nov. 4 in a suburb south of Chicago. The election came about a month after the 43-year-old was released after serving more than two decades. (Photo: Manuel Martinez/WBEZ)

Stanley Howard displays the sticker he got after voting for the first time at another early voting site south of Chicago. The 63-year-old spent nearly four decades in prison after being convicted of a murder he didn't commit, for which he was later pardoned. (Photo: Manuel Martinez/WBEZ)

Lawsuit claims disabled young people in Illinois prisons were denied special education for years

By Charlotte West

A new lawsuit claims Illinois has been violating state and federal law for nearly two decades by failing to provide special education services to young people locked up in adult prisons.

The federal lawsuit against the Illinois Department of Corrections, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice and the Illinois State Board of Education was filed at the end of last month. At the end of September, plaintiffs filed a motion seeking to make the case a class action lawsuit. Attorneys estimate the suit could affect hundreds of individuals currently in custody.

The lawsuit was filed by Equip for Equality, a nonprofit advocating for the civil rights of individuals with disabilities, and Latham & Watkins. It covers those who were 22 or younger when they were first incarcerated and who had a plan outlining special education services from their previous school.

The complaint states that the correctional agencies have failed to identify eligible students; notify eligible students of their right to these educational services; or provide any special education services and high school credit-bearing courses.

"These violations are the result of a widespread failure to attend to the educational welfare and needs of students with disabilities who have not yet earned their high school diploma," the complaint reads.

A spokesperson for the Illinois Department of Corrections declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Plaintiff Exodus Hebert, now 23, was 20 years old when he was admitted to the Illinois Department of Corrections. He had received special education while in the custody of the juvenile system but was unable to access those same services in the adult system, he wrote in an email.

"I really need this special education so I can finally get my high school diploma," he wrote. "It's very hard to understand schooling with the disability I have."

Hebert wants to show his family he did something great and also demonstrate to others who struggle with education that it's still possible to achieve something. "I enjoyed school. It was just so hard but when I did understand it, it meant the world to me," he said.

'There is no system'

In Illinois, correctional agencies must provide special education services and access to high school education to students with disabilities who are in the custody of adult correctional facilities through the end of the school year in which they turn 22. Federal law also requires states to provide special education services to eligible incarcerated students with disabilities.

In 2006, the Illinois legislature made the state juvenile justice department responsible for providing special education services and access to a high school education to young people in adult facilities. But since the law passed, there have been no special education services provided nor any high school education for students in adult facilities who might be eligible, said Olga Pribyl, vice president of the Special Education Clinic at Equip for Equality.

The agencies' failure to provide access to special education services means that eligible young people with disabilities have been unable to earn a GED or high school diploma, which is required to access vocational courses or other higher education, according to the lawsuit. In addition, it excludes them from earning time off their sentences for participating in educational programs, Pribyl said.

In August, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a statement of interest in a similar lawsuit in Delaware, affirming that state agencies can't avoid their responsibilities to students with disabilities.

The Illinois Department of Corrections only tracks the numbers of individuals with physical disabilities in their custody, not those who qualify for special education. But around half of students attending school in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice received special education.

In addition to getting the plaintiffs access to education and services, the goal of the lawsuit is to establish systems to identify and notify eligible students of their rights upon entry, and implement special education and high school programs in adult prisons, Pribyl said.

"It's not about improving the system," she said. "Right now, there is no system."

This story was originally published on September 26, 2024.

What is this newsletter?

Launched in 2021, College Inside digs into the nexus of two major systems shaping our society: higher education and criminal justice. This newsletter, published by Open Campus, sheds light on the most-pressing challenges facing incarcerated students during and after incarceration.

Our ongoing partnership with WBEZ Chicago, including collaboration with the Prisoncast! team, has produced in-depth coverage of education in Illinois prisons, serving as a model for how local reporting can reveal both systemic challenges and efforts to overcome them. Prisoncast! is produced jointly by WBEZ and The Marshall Project.

A man incarcerated at Stateville prison died during a heat wave. Now his family is suing.

By Lauren Frost

Family members of a man incarcerated at Stateville Correctional Center who died during a heat wave there are suing the state's prison system in federal court.

The wrongful death lawsuit was filed on Nov. 14 on behalf of the estate of Michael Broadway, who lost consciousness in his top-level cell in June as temperatures inside the dilapidated prison reached dangerous levels, according to the civil complaint. Broadway's family is suing the Illinois Department of Corrections for allegedly subjecting him to inhumane living conditions and inadequate medical care.

Broadway's family members and attorneys gathered outside Stateville prison to announce the suit. They allege what happened to Broadway this summer was due to the "cruelty and callous indifference" of those charged with his care.

"They let my man suffocate in this place," said Terrell Vaughn, Broadway's lifelong friend, at a press conference outside Stateville on Nov. 14. "He died, and it didn't have to happen this way."

A Will County autopsy report lists the cause of death for the 51-year-old as bronchial asthma, with "heat stress" being a significant contributing condition.

Broadway's death came months after Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker announced plans to close Stateville, located just north of Joliet.

Nearly everyone incarcerated inside the 99-year-old prison was abruptly moved out following a federal judge's order in August.

After the judge's ruling, most of Stateville's population was transferred to other prisons around the state, escaping deteriorating conditions in the aging buildings. But for Broadway – an author, a Northwestern University student and a father – that came too late.

Michael Broadway, 51, died months before a judge ordered Stateville prison vacated. Photo: Northwestern University

Broadway died on June 19th as Illinois was in the midst of a notably long heat wave, with outside temperatures repeatedly reaching highs in the 90s. According to the new federal lawsuit, Broadway's cell was on the top gallery of his housing unit. The lawsuit says in the midst of the heat, windows in his unit were nailed shut, and a fan near his cell was off and padlocked.

Broadway had asthma, and on the afternoon of the 19th, the lawsuit says he called out to friends in neighboring cells that he was struggling to breathe. But instead of calling a "Code 3" for a medical emergency or 911, the lawsuit alleges corrections officers on duty delayed care. It also alleges a nurse who finally responded initially refused to climb up to Broadway's cell because it was "too hot upstairs," before eventually walking up and administering naloxone, which reverses opioid overdoses.

"When he needed help from the people who were entrusted to help him, whose job it was to help him, he was failed at every turn," attorney Terah Tollner said.

The lawsuit claims an unresponsive Broadway was transported to St. Joseph's Hospital almost an hour after he first asked for help. There he was pronounced dead.

Tollner says the suit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, aims to hold the Illinois Department of Corrections and other defendants accountable for Broadway's death.

"The Department takes seriously its commitment to serve justice and support the well-being of both our staff and the individuals in custody," spokeswoman Naomi Puzzello said in a statement. She declined to comment further, citing the lawsuit.

Other defendants named in the lawsuit include the controversial prison health care provider Wexford Health Sources, which has a documented history of allowing preventable deaths in Illinois prisons. Also named in the suit are the warden and chief engineer of Stateville, and individual staff responsible for Broadway's care.

Wexford did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In addition to their calls for justice, Broadway's family and friends shared memories of his life, describing him as "outgoing," "fun-loving," and passionate about education.

"We still have loved ones and family [who are] incarcerated," said Broadway's wife, Chunece Jones-Broadway, "and we don't want to see... what our family is going through happen to anyone else."

Lauren Frost is the audio and engagement producer for WBEZ's Prisoncast! project. This story was originally published on Nov. 14, 2024.

About WBEZ's *Prisoncast!* project

What is *Prisoncast!*?

Prisoncast! is an audio & journalism project organized by WBEZ in Chicago and Illinois Public Radio stations to serve people inside Illinois prisons and their loved ones outside. Our goal is to create something families can share together.

We also produce journalism and interview segments that provide practical, actionable information and accurate news based on what you tell our journalists. Everything on our show stems from a question, request or idea from people incarcerated, their LOs, or groups working inside. We strive to do this show with you and for you.

How do I submit requests for the show?

People with internet access can fill out surveys electronically at **www.wbez.org/prisoncast**. People outside can make requests and record a voicemail dedication at **312-893-2931**, or send a voice memo or email to **prisoncast@wbez.org**. People inside can fill out a paper survey and mail it back to: Prisoncast! c/o **WBEZ, 848 E. Grand Ave., Chicago, IL., 60611-3509.** We will also add you on GTL if you request it!

Are you playing all requests on the radio?

No. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we likely will not be able to air all the requests we receive during the two-hour broadcast.

Will I know ahead of time if my request will be aired during the broadcast?

We can't guarantee that you will. We will try to notify as many people before the broadcast as possible.

How and when can I listen?

You can listen on an old-school radio or a GTL tablet's FM radio app (find your local station below). We know some locations get spotty or no radio reception. If that's the case, please tell us and we'll work to reach you another way!

Where to find *Prisoncast!* on the radio

WSIU, 91.9FM, 90.3FM, 88.9FM
WILL, 90.9FM + 580AM
WUIS, 91.9FM, 89.3FM
WVIK, 90.3FM

WBEZ 91.5FM, 91.1FM, 90.7FM
WGLT, 89.1FM
WNIJ, 89.5FM, 89.1FM, 90.5FM, 91.3FM
WCBU, 89.9FM
WIUM, 91.3FM, 89.5FM, 90.7FM

Facility	IPR station	Facility	IPR station
Big Muddy River	WSIU	Menard	WSIU
Centralia	WSIU	Murphysboro	WSIU
Danville	WILL	Pinckneyville	WSIU + WILL
Decatur	WUIS + WILL + WGLT	Pontiac	WILL + WCBU + WGLT + WBEZ + WNIJ
Dixon	WNIJ + WVIK	Robinson	WSIU
East Moline	WVIK	Shawnee	WSIU
Graham	WUIS + WILL	Sheridan	WNIJ + WBEZ
Hill	WCBU + WIUM	Southwestern	WILL
Illinois River	WCBU + WGLT + WUIS + WIUM	Stateville	WBEZ
Jacksonville	WUIS + WILL + WIUM	Taylorville	WUIS + WILL
Kewanee	WVIK + WIUM + WCBU	Vandalia	WUIS + WSIU
Lawrence	WSIU	Vienna	WSIU
Lincoln	WUIS + WILL + WCBU + WGLT	Western Illinois	WUIS + WIUM
Logan	WUIS + WILL + WCBU + WGLT		

***Prisoncast!*: a special journalism & audio project for people in Illinois prisons**

This December, WBEZ Chicago & public radio stations across Illinois are collaborating on a special radio broadcast for people in Illinois prisons, their families and loved ones. Check the previous page of this mailing for your closest station.

The Prisoncast! Holiday Show will air on **Sunday, Dec. 22nd at 2 p.m.** Central Time on your local NPR station. This show will feature songs, sounds, and information requested by people in prison and their loved ones.

The project is driven entirely by your requests and ideas! We will play as many requests as possible, but we will not be able to air all of them. Please fill out this survey and tell us what you want to hear. Mail responses to: **Prisoncast! c/o WBEZ, 848 E. Grand Ave., Chicago, IL, 60611-3509**. **Also, let us know if we can add you on GTL!** Loved ones can also leave voicemail requests & dedications at **312-893-2931**, or **email prisoncast@wbez.org.**

1. **Your name:** 2. **Your nickname/preferred name:**
3. **Your pronouns:** ☐ he/him ☐ she/her ☐ they/them ☐ other_____
4. **Can we use your name on the radio?** ☐ yes ☐ no

5. *Prisoncast!* seeks to serve you & your loved ones outside with accurate news & practical information. Is there a question you have for our journalists, an issue we can explore or explain, or a topic you think we should address in our broadcasts?

6. What is a sound from outside prison walls you'd like us to record and broadcast? Why do you want to hear that sound? (Previous examples: Lake Michigan waves, a family party, a roller coaster at Six Flags, rain on a tin roof.) *NOTE: If recording this will require us being in touch with someone outside, please provide contact information. If the sound occurs at a specific location, please elaborate.*

7. Is there a song you'd like us to play during the show? Why do you want to hear that song? Feel free to include a short dedication to someone inside or outside.

8. What is your favorite holiday tradition, memory, or activity, past or present?

9. What is something you want people on the outside to know about you or your life on the inside?

10. How did you get this survey and learn about *Prisoncast!*? Aside from radio, how else can we reach you inside with news & information?